Chrome Shelled Regios Volume25

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鋼殻のレギオス

CHROME SHELLED REGIOS

25 アンド・ゼン・アフター・ザット

ファンタジア文庫

荒野に一つの都市がある。
基礎化する前に滅んでしまった都市。
ニーナはランドローラーから下りた。

鋼殻のレギオス

CHROME SHELLED REGIOS

25 アンド・ゼン・アフター・ザット

「四人揃って
お説教を受けて頂きますから、ね」

「あの、
すっごく痛いんです、
けど……」

アルシェイラを掴む
リーリンの手が力を強める。
雰囲気の変化に
子供たちも気付き、
顔色を変える。

「あいかわらず、
とんでもない剄力だな」

彼と彼女は、
青の炎を纏った獣に乗って現れた。

「レイフォン！
フェリ！」

Early Diamond

A surprising sound came from the midsection of the roaming bus.

It was the sound of the outer buffer partition hitting the main vehicle body.

The words written on the hanging banner and the scene visible through the vehicle windows made the passengers breathe sighs of relief.

'Welcome to Zuellni'

The banner was quite large, so large that it seemed like it was visible from anywhere in the roaming bus station.

Upon being informed that their long journey had finally ended, the passengers stared raptly at the scenery of Zuellni showing through the windows, waving excitedly at the students near the station.

More than eighty percent of the passengers looked to be the same age as he was, but the others were independent traders who had come to trade information between cities or business agents of other cities.

"It seems like we made it."

"Yeah."

Nina replied after her childhood friend sitting next to her spoke up cheerfully.

"We're here."

Academy City Zuellni.

From today onwards, this would be Nina's new city.

The entrance ceremony completed without issue. The feel of the brand-new uniform and the lightness of not having a weapon hung on her waist made Nina feel a bit restless, but she quickly got used to those feelings.

"I can't go to alchemy right away."

Harley, who had come here to study alchemy techniques, complained, but those feelings almost didn't show on his face at all . The excitement of coming to a new place probably still hadn't vanished.

Nina was dissatisfied with the fact that she couldn't immediately wear a Dite after entering school, but she would just have to bear it for half a year.

No, maybe she wouldn't have to bear it for half a year.

"I heard the Military Arts Division was going to hold a competition among the first-years."

"Yeah, since this year is the period for the inter-city battles. It seems like they're going to hold a competition to gauge fighting strength."

"Are you going?"

"That's the best way to confirm my own strength."

Nina hadn't been permitted to participate in the inter-city battles in her old home. However, this was an Academy City. Almost all the Military Artists were about the same age as Nina, so she could show herself off as long as she proved her strength.

"Well, there's no need to worry since battles between Academy Cities have limitations like weapon restrictions and such, but....."

"What, are you worried about me?"

"It would be hard for me to go back home if something happened to you, right?"

Nina laughed at his frank words.

"I won't let anyone gossip. Never mind that for now. If I get a Dite, I'll leave the maintenance to you."

"Of course, that's my job."

Harley reliably nodded agreement to Nina.

An irritating amount of cheers filled the area.

"Good luck."

"Yeah..... Thanks."

The competition was carried out with groups of ten. Those who won the most victories in a round-robin competition within their group could advance, and then it would become an elimination tournament.

Harley gave a sports drink to Nina, who had just finished one match. There was no space on the bench, so Nina sat leaning against the wall. She put her practice iron whips to the side of her, propping them against her shoulder.

"You're on a roll. How are things?"

In order to get through things in a short time, the pooled group competition would only be held until today ended, and allegedly the elimination tournament would also end tomorrow. There were other team matches being held here, and the sound of intense collision and shouts flew around, so the two of them naturally raised their voices.

"The balance is really bad. As I thought, mock weapons are no good."

"I think it's much better than the Black Dites you normally use, is it a problem with the safety equipment?"

"It's not that kind of problem. How should I describe it..... It feels really hard to use. As I thought, I have to use your Dite."

Harley was happy to hear Nina say that. Though many problems had happened when Nina had expressed that she wanted to go to an Academy City, Harley felt that it was good that they had come here.

"If you win in this competition, you might be able to join a platoon. With that, you'd be able to carry a Dite earlier too."

"Yeah."

Nina was focusing on regulating her breathing, so her responses were very brief. Her gaze didn't leave the match that was happening right now. Though her attitude was serious, her mouth looked somewhat happy. Nina hadn't been able to participate in this kind of official competition in the Senou City Schneibel, so she was probably very happy.

Nina's family - the Antalk family - could be called a famous family of Military Artists. It was said to have existed since Schneibel appeared, so they were probably the most ancient family of Military Artists.

Harley's family was all normal. But they were a family that worked with Dites generation after generation, so they were very involved with Military Artists. Harley had become Nina's conversation partner since they were the same age, and they got along well enough to go to an Academy City together.

"Nina Antalk."

"Here!"

Nina headed to the competition grounds after her name was called. Harley watched her go.

(Well, we're not lovers or anything, but.....)

That didn't make Harley feel lonely. To him, Nina felt more like a strange relative.

The match started.

"Yaaaaah!"

Nina shouted loudly, her Kei flow making the air rumble.

Even if they were just undeveloped first-year Military Artists, Harley couldn't follow their movements with his eyes once they got serious. Though he didn't know how the battle was turning out , Harley didn't doubt that Nina would win.

"?"

As he thought about the parameters of the Dite in her hand, Harley felt an itchy sensation on the back of his head.

After turning and looking over, he saw a boy in a wheelchair close by, near the entrance. Was he also a first-year student? A Military Artist wearing fighting gear was next to him talking to him. But that boy was looking over here, so it was uncertain whether he was listening to the Military Artist next to him.

More accurately, his gaze was passing over Harley, and directed towards Nina's match.

The boy was pretty handsome, but he had a very gloomy expression. And it was very sharp.

The Military Artist next to him excitedly spoke to him. But the boy in the wheelchair manipulated his wheelchair and turned, then left the competition area.

The boy hadn't even glanced at that Military Artist, but he just made a resigned sigh and then returned to his group.

"......Hmm?"

All Harley could do was tilt his head and put on a confused expression.

Nina won overwhelmingly in the group stage and then entered the elimination tournament.

Nina also got through that elimination tournament without trouble and obtained victory.

The fourteenth platoon came looking for Nina.

The captain, Ozark Hankley, was a sixth-year student. He belonged to the oldest class, and hence his appearance was clearly more capable than the Military Artists in her year. But a gentle smile appeared naturally on his face. She felt like the atmosphere that came from this man resembled that of a great tree standing at ease in the forest.

Shin Kaihan came with him, a third-year student. That man had a thin body and dressed a bit fancily, resembling a bird with luxurious plumage.

A tree and a bird - though that was Nina's first impression, the two of them seemed like a good match.

But Nina didn't have a very good impression of Shin.

That was because his laid-back impression was very unfamiliar to Nina. The men Nina had come across until now, including her father, had mostly been stern people. Ozark fit that type, but

although Shin wasn't the complete opposite, he was completely unlike any man Nina had interacted with until now.

Even so, she could instantly see that Ozark was trustworthy and that this was a very notable event. Though Nina felt that immediately being recognized by Zuellni's elite group of Military Artists right after entering school seemed a bit too easy, she accepted the offer.

The next day, the badge of the fourteenth platoon and a license to carry weapons were in Nina's hands.

Harley took the Dite she had gotten with that license and borrowed a fieldwork classroom from the alchemy department.

"Then....."

Harley had managed to borrow this classroom when no one was using it. Since there wasn't much time, he rapidly turned on the portable terminal and started preparing to work.

Ozark had showed a pained expression when she said she was letting Harley, who was just a first-year and not even in the alchemy department, maintain her Dite. But Nina had explained Harley's history and vouched for him.

This was an extremely joyful thing to Harley.

"But maybe doing this is a bit selfish."

Harley had grown up in a family of Dite technicians, and it was also a fact that he had come here to help maintain Nina's Dites. He

was confident about how to maintain Nina's iron whips to be most suited for her use.

But this wasn't Schneibel, it was Zuellni. It wouldn't be strange for people to feel unhappy about the explanation that it would be better for a newly-entered first-year student to maintain the Dite.

"All I can do is give it my all."

After encouraging himself on, Harley started inputting data. He first put the data of the Dites that Nina had always used before leaving Schneibel into the terminal, then considered Nina's changes in height, weight, and strength since then, adjusting the numbers one by one. Harley had long since written a simulation program configured with the pair of iron whips Nina used. It was a specific program that only Nina could use, and the Antalk family iron whip techniques were moves that generally weren't shared with outsiders, so Harley couldn't let other people see this simulation program. Rather than Harley being trusted, it was more like the Antalk family had allowed him to write this kind of program because he was from the Sutton family.

Harley ran the program using the new numbers as he checked whether the movements were strange anywhere. He had already done this yesterday, so he was just doing this as a precaution.

Military Artists' battles were carried out at a world of high speed driven by physical ability. A slight mistake in settings could result in extraneous drag, which could further reduce speed.

In battles outside the city, even slight damage could lead to death, or when fighting filth monsters that could easily kill in one strike, these effects became problems of life and death.

Cutting corners would create life-threatening problems for the Military Artists who used these weapons.

So he couldn't let himself slack off.

Harley carried out checks from all angles in the time permitted to him.

"Are there any problems?"

There couldn't be any big problems.

"Okay, that's it then."

He decided the numeric settings here. All that was left was to press the buttons on Nina's iron whips.

Just as Harley planned on pressing the buttons, the door opened.

"Huh?"

The fieldwork classroom was filled with a harsh creaking sound .

Someone had pulled open the door with brute force.

After reflexively looking back, Harley saw men enter the room with rough footsteps. They wore Military Artist outfits, but their faces looked barbaric and unlike the Military Artists Harley were used to.

"Um..... Excuse me, I'm using this classroom right now."

Harley had a bad premonition.

Even so, he still tried to say this to them, holding on to some kind of hope.

There were three men in total. Even though they heard Harley's words, they just showed villainous smiles and didn't reply.

"Um....."

The men surrounded the shocked, frozen Harley.

"Do you need something?"

"Yeah, we want to let you taste some pain."

"Hm? Huuh?"

"Don't worry, don't worry, we'll just break an arm."

"You'll be able to get it treated in three days at the hospital, so you don't need to worry, right?"

"No, I'm worried!"

Harley couldn't understand the situation. In any case, he was sure that something unreasonable was happening.

There were other classrooms nearby, but no one came over to check what was going on. Though that felt strange, the current Harley could only open and close his mouth like a fish out of water.

"Well, you were just unlucky."

After saying this, one of the men grabbed Harley's arm.

It was going to be broken - Harley imagined the pain that was coming and his eyes closed.

"Wait."

"Hah? What!?"

Just as his eyes closed, a new voice reached him. It was a voice with a gloomy tone. But after that voice sounded, the feeling of his arm being grabbed disappeared, and then came the sound of screams and fierce noises.

"......Huh?"

After Harley timidly opened his eyes, what showed up was the wheelchaired boy from before. He was between Harley and the men.

One of them was flat on the floor.

"What's up with you!?"

The remaining two men shouted at the boy. But the boy didn't back down, continuing to look at the men with an irritated gaze.

He wore a General Studies uniform, but opposed Military Artists as if it were natural.

"You trash are too noisy. Shut up like the honorless cockroaches you are."

Though it was just a low mumble, it wasn't inaudible.

The expressions of the men instantly twisted and they charged at the boy.

He was going to get killed - Harley thought.

But things didn't turn out like that.

A strong wind blew through the fieldwork classroom, and the portable terminal instantly lifted up with a clatter.

It happened before Harley's eyes. The boy took his hands off of the wheel of the wheelchair, grabbing the hands that the men reached out to him.

The two men's legs flew towards the ceiling as they turned upside down.

After the boy casually swept his arms out, the men were tossed onto the already-unconscious man, then became motionless.

"....."

Harley could only gape. The boy, who returned his hands to the wheelchair, sighed listlessly, and then faced Harley again.

"Th.....Thank you."

Harley lowered his head, unsure what to do.

"....."

The boy ignored Harley's motions, looking at the screen of the portable terminal. Though his face was well-sculpted, his eyes were as sharp as when Harley had first seen him, and he looked very gloomy since his bangs were very long.

"Um....."

Harley spoke up towards the boy, not knowing what to do.

"Move the center of mass on the left side down by three centimels."

"Huh?"

The right side is fine this way. But it's best to move the left center of mass down to reduce the strain."

The boy left only those words, and then stared at the unconscious men as if feeling irritated.

The aisles between the tables placed in the fieldwork room were very narrow. The fallen men would be extremely obstructive if he were to use the wheelchair.

In the end, he stayed there until the city police arrived.

He seemed completely to be in a bad mood, but at least it wasn't because he was angry at Harley for something.

Harley introduced himself and also learned his name.

Kirik Seron.

This matter concerning Harley quickly reached Nina's ears.

The one who told her about this was a second-year girl who looked bleary-eyed. She had talked to Nina while she was looking at the bulletin board during noon break.

"Is that true?"

Nina couldn't understand the thinking behind Military Artists attacking ordinary people. Every city forbid Military Artists from using their strength on ordinary people. Once an injury was judged to be deliberate, the punishment would be dozens of times

more severe than for normal people, regardless of how light the injury was. Depending on the situation, it was possible to be expelled from the city..... That was the death sentence.

The difference in physical ability between Military Artists and normal people was extremely large, and there was a need to enact such steep measures in order for the two sides to coexist.

On the other hand, there was also the law that when something happened to a Military Artist, he had to be protected.

"At the time, the Military Artist students were all having class somewhere else~ So no one could go to help, it was so dangerous~ "

Her drawn-out tone dumped cold water on Nina's almost-boiling brain. Nina managed to keep calm due to it.

It was a difficult action to forgive.

"Who were those guys?"

"The police already captured them~ He wasn't hurt either, so you can relax."

Nina knew that Harley hadn't been hurt, since the Dite that Harley had finished fine-tuning was already strapped on her waist . Harley hadn't mentioned this matter at all when he had given the Dite to her.

"That idiot."

After cursing at Harley from afar, Nina kept thinking.

She didn't understand why delinquent Military Artists would be going after Harley, who had just entered school. They were probably approaching Harley for other motives.

Then, why?

There was no need to consider it at all. The two of them had both just entered school and hadn't been able to make anyone who counted as a friend yet. They were the closest to each other.

"Was it to get me?"

The only huge change that had happened to Nina..... was her joining a platoon. Maybe that was the reason.

"It's Gattman Gray.[1]"

"Huh?"

As expected, the girl still said that name with her laid-back tone.

"Gattman Gray~ He's a third-year Military Artist, and famous for being a delinquent and for his Military Arts technique. But! I heard that he lost all his opportunities to join a platoon because he was a delinquent."

".....Meaning that he's going after me?"

"It seems like he marketed himself a lot towards the fourteenth platoon. The captain also mentioned that he'd be able to join the

platoon if he changed his ways, but since your joining the platoon is a foregone conclusion, his ambitions have been for nothing."

Her worries were correct. This girl thought the same, which was why she was saying this to Nina.

"Thank you very much, uh....."

"I'm Selina~ Selina Vin."

"Thank you very much. Then....."

"Ah, wait~"

Selina's voice calling for her to stop came from behind, but Nina couldn't stop.

Though she heard it, she could no longer stop.

Nina got through her afternoon classes. Afterwards was still her first platoon training. Though this was her first day meeting the platoon members, such matters were no longer in Nina's mind.

No matter how much time passed, the heat filling Nina wouldn't cool down.

It was anger. Of course, it was because he had struck out at Harley, but she couldn't turn a blind eye to how he vented his resentment towards Nina on Harley first.

Of course, Nina didn't like how he wanted to stab her in the back since he couldn't face her head-on.

Gattman Gray.

Nina hated everything about that person.

It took Nina until the evening to find the place he hung out.

That place was in a building, and it seemed to be a place where older students consumed alcohol. The board in front of the door had the age restrictions set by the Student Council marked on it. Gattman was a third-year student, so he shouldn't be able to enter this store.

Though a 'closed' sign was hung on the door, loud music came from inside. Nina marched into the store with enough force to break the door.

The inside clearly hadn't been properly cleaned, and she really couldn't imagine customers being drawn to drink in this place. Trash was everywhere, and dried-out food debris was left on the floor. The smell of alcohol rushed into her nostrils, and Nina grimaced and glared at the people inside the store.

Sofas and tables had been used to make a partition inside the store. Her target was in the innermost place inside the store.

"You're....."

"Are you Gattman Gray?"

Her Kei-bearing voice thundered through the store, and the bottle of alcohol nearest to Gattman shattered. The small amount

of liquid that had remained inside splashed on the corner of his mouth. Gattman licked it off and then stood up. The men resembling cronies next to him did the same.

Five people..... All Military Arts students.

Meaning that all of them were the same as the people who had attacked Harley?

"You're shameless!"

The men reacted to Nina's impulsive words.

Gattman reached out a hand to stop their movements.

"Yo, new student. Do you want to join?"

"I don't want to listen to you hallucinate."

Nina ignored Gattman's words, taking a stance that made her ready to draw her Dites anytime.

"You attacked Harley. Why?"

"Because he was too arrogant."

"What did you say?"

"I shouldn't need to say anything about a mere first-year like you joining a platoon, but a mere first-year like that brat maintaining Dites is just the same. He won't understand unless he learns a lesson."

Gattman smiled as he spoke.

"You should understand your position, first-year."

"Position? You said position?"

That word made Nina's anger become even more intense.

"If you're talking position, then what is a piece of trash like you complaining about!? Someone like you is just a hindrance to people who are thinking about the future. You should understand your own position!"

"......You can talk, huh."

Gattman's hand reached to his weapon belt.

Nina also pulled her Dites out from her weapon belt.

"Restoration."

The restoration keywords sounded through the store almost simultaneously. Two iron whips appeared in Nina's hands, while a somewhat-large knife appeared in Gattman's hands.

(A knife?)

To be honest, Gattman had a large physique. To Nina, a knife that emphasized small movements seemed unnatural in the hands of someone like him.

But Nina's anger ignored that kind of hesitation and urged her on. Gattman's cronies didn't move. In addition, they even backed away to make a space for the two of them to fight.

Gattman moved first.

(Fast!)

The recoil of his feet kicking off the ground broke apart the sofa, and Gattman's body moved in front of Nina.

He swung the knife down from above. Nina blocked the strike with her left iron whip. The Kei flow coiled around the knife became external Kei, and Nina also released external Kei from her iron whip. The shockwaves destroyed each other and produced an invisible explosion. The vibrations from the explosion made Nina's eyes lose function for a moment.

Even so, Nina still twisted her body. That was because she felt some kind of premonition.

Heat came from her abdomen..... on her right side.

"!"

Pain from being stabbed made Nina back off. Her attack also locked down Gattman's movements, so he didn't pursue.

Her vision instantly recovered.

There was a bloodstain on the right side of her abdomen.

A knife was fallen on the ground.

It wasn't a Dite weapon, but rather an ordinary knife. Her muscles had refused to allow the knife to enter her body, so it hadn't reached her organs. The fact that the knife had fallen loose when she backed off was proof.

Gattman's grinning face was reflected in her eyes. He held two knives of the same form in his left hand. His hunting jacket was opened, the inside faintly visible. The image of neatly-arranged knives entered her eyes.

He had a large number of throwing knives hidden on his body.

"You....."

"Dites aren't the only way to fight."

Gattman's left hand flashed out.

The two knives flew straight at Nina.

Nina dodged.

Gattman closed the distance.

"!"

The pain from her abdomen slowed her movements. Even so, Nina parried Gattman's attack and then turned her defense into offense. A strike from her right iron whip tore through the air, and the shockwave destroyed the sofas and tables around them.

Though he had a large physique, his movements were sharp.

"You haven't practiced enough if a single scrape slows you down."

"Shut up!"

Gattman's clearly-provocative words hooked Nina. She was going to charge forward. She would have to let anger take over her body in order to forget about the pain in her abdomen.

But Nina was unable to move forward.

Someone was pressing down on her shoulder.

Just that was enough to suppress Nina's charge.

"Shin!"

Gattman's expression changed as he glared at the person standing behind Nina.

Nina looked back. The person standing there was Shin Kaihan.

"Wow, there's no helping you."

Shin restored his Dite and pointed it at Gattman. It was a rapier. The needle-like weapon that was pointed at him seemed to make Gattman unable to move.

"You skipped out on the training where you would meet your platoon members for the first time, yet what are you doing in this kind of place?"

That voice awed Nina. Shin, who looked very unreliable, was clearly showing anger. That feeling of pressure rapidly ate away at the fiercely-burning emotions inside Nina.

"Let's go."

"But!'

As Shin grabbed on to her shoulder, Nina managed to muster her burning emotions and tried to resist.

"Enough is enough."

But that action ended up being useless resistance. As expected, Nina couldn't win against Shin's glare.

"Wait, Shin. Why did you choose that kind of brat and not me?"

"You had a promise with the captain, but you're still hanging around here. Do I need to explain further?"

"I'm stronger than that girl! Stronger than you too!"

Shin laughed as he responded to Gattman's proclamation.

"You were certainly stronger as a first-year. But your strength hasn't changed since then. Maybe you're stronger than this girl right now, but next week this girl will be better than you."

"Cut the crap!"

"In that case, do you want to try?"

Nina held her breath at the unexpected development.

"Next week you'll fight with this girl. It's no fun for me to keep you bitterly screwing around behind my back, so how's that?"

"Hah, who would agree to that."

"If you don't agree to it, then you're honestly finished this time. Our captain might look like a nice guy, but when it's time to lay down the law, he lays down the law. Do you understand? By this point we're in a situation where you picked a fight with our platoon."

"Tch!"

"We'll slaughter you if you don't agree, and you better not think I'm exaggerating."

Nina felt confused. She had heard that the platoons were the elite group of Zuellni's Military Artists, but hearing about slaughtering and whatnot made them seem like delinquents.

"Tch, I got it. But if I win....."

"You definitely can't join our platoon anymore. Instead, I'll let you go and not take you to the city police."

"......Tch, then--"

Gattman's eyes looked sharply towards Nina. That pair of dark, heated eyes made Nina raise her alertness.

"Cancel the thing about that girl entering the platoon."

"What? You!?"

"Alright."

Nina was taken aback. Even more surprisingly, Shin agreed to that proposal without hesitating.

Before Nina said anything, Shin yanked on Nina's arm and left the store.

"What were you thinking!?"

"I was thinking about how to teach someone who lacks self-control like you."

Shin's merciless words made Nina suck in a breath.

"This isn't your hometown. Maybe your hometown only had stupid Military Artists, but that's not the case here. You came here because you planned on training outside your city, right? There

are only a small fraction of such people, and although they're not all on Gattman's level, almost all Military Artists have some kind of problems. Think about it. Heroic Military Artists who have ability and who follow orders and who are very strong, promising Military Artists who can become the core of a city's defense, do you think the residents of the city would easily let them leave? We're able to live comfortable lives because of those unspoken vows to protect the city that we've carried since birth."

Nina had nothing to respond with, and she thought of the reactions of her parents when she had decided to go to Zuellni.

They had said the same things.

"But this isn't related....."

"Right, no one would tell you to go back now. But if you do the same thing next time, I'll tell you to go back. People who can't see multiple perspectives are unnecessary in an Academy City, no matter whether they're ordinary people or Military Artists."

The drying of the blood staining her clothes gave her an uncomfortable feeling. The bleeding had already stopped, but she wasn't able to remove the blood staining her clothes. The passerby looked over at Nina curiously.

Something was draped over her shoulder. It was Shin's military coat.

"Senpai....."

"The city police will come if you wander the roads looking like that."

Nina had originally wanted to refuse, but that sentence made her silently wear the coat. It was obvious, but the coat was very large for her. Though it covered Nina's wound, the sleeves were very long.

"Next week you're going to fight that guy seriously."

"Yes."

"Can you win?"

"Of course."

"Don't judge him by how he looks, he's not bad. Because even though he has a sturdy body, he's flexible, and he's very good with tricks. Once you're contending with him, you can't be careless. He's a type you wouldn't be good at dealing with."

"That....."

"You use those weapons well, and your defense is very firm. But your style loses to Gattman's. That guy won't look for a single winning strike, he'll accurately whittle down his opponent's strength, so he's used to being counterattacked. If you don't beat him immediately, he'll keep giving you trouble until you go down. Well, that kind of time-consuming style was also a reason for not letting Gattman join the platoon, although of course it was mostly his behavior."

After a long sigh, Shin walked forward.

"Senpai, could I ask what your relationship with Gattman is?"

"......We were first-years at the same time, so we'd bump into each other often."

Nina felt like complicated emotions were mixed into those words, but Shin seemed to be unwilling to talk about it. Maybe he was hated their interactions.

"Well, I should say something like 'go win' rather than 'can you win?'."

Shin's expression relaxed and he shrugged.

"That guy's weak point is his lackluster stamina. That's because he always skipped training. But it's only lackluster compared to the level of a platoon member, it's still enough for his brutal personality."

"Okay."

Nina listened to her senpai's opinions with a diligent expression .

"You should get in a wining blow or defend completely until his stamina runs out. But if you get hit by a knife like today and keep losing blood, deciding the victor with stamina will soon make you lose."

Indeed, she could carry out a drawn-out battle as long as she could maintain her internal Kei. But if she kept bleeding, she wouldn't be able to. Even if she could close the wound with internal Kei, it was very difficult to replenish blood in a fight.

Actually, Nina currently felt like her body was a bit heavy. Her physical strength had decreased as well because of the blood loss.

"You have a weakness..... You've never fought a real fight, right ?"

That critique made Nina speechless.

That was true.

Nina case her face down and bit her lip.

But Shin grinned.

"So I'll thoroughly rehabilitate you, starting tomorrow. Well, although we won't be using real weapons. But my strikes will hurt a lot."

Just like she wanted - Nina's spirits rose.

She was willing to do anything for the necessary action of beating Gattman.

"I'm counting on you then, Senpai!"

Though they were on a road, Nina bowed her head to Shin without any concern.

On the other hand, Shin got flustered.

The 'rehabilitation' Shin had spoken of wasn't a lie at all.

"......Uu."

The pain that refused to disappear, as if it had infiltrated her body, made Nina drop to the floor. The mop handle hit the metal floor, and the loud noise resounded outwards.

This was the Mechanical Department in the city's underground.

Nina was working to clean the Mechanical Department.

Though she was focusing on defeating Gattman right now, she wasn't actually that naive. After leaving home and running away from Schneibel, Nina had almost no money. The money she had brought had all been spent for Zuellni's entrance fees and all sorts of necessities.

She had to make money in order to live.

She had chosen this job of cleaning the Mechanical Department in order to reach that goal.

Not only was it noisy here, the paths were complex and interlaced, and pipes carrying dangerous liquefied selenium were also snaked along nearby. Of course, it was physically toilsome, and apparently almost everyone hated the vile environment.

"Damn, I can't lose to something like this."

But Nina was more concerned about Shin's harsh training and the battle coming up with Gattman than something like this, so she wasn't bitter at all.

She picked up the mop and focused on cleaning. With every movement, paralyzing pain shot through every corner of her body.

Shin's thrusts were fast and sharp, as well as very accurate.

He had easily gotten through the gaps of Nina's defense of iron whips. The rapier could move faster than Nina's iron whips. Though Nina realized that, she couldn't accept it.

(My dad never had trouble with those things.)

That was true.

Nina had seen her father in countless matches, and the weapons of her opponents had always varied. There had been people who used rapiers like Shin among them.

Her father had won all of those matches.

Nina ought to be able to do that too. But she couldn't do it, the only reason being that she was immature.

"Damn!"

Nina went through image training in her mind countless times, but she still couldn't deal with Shin's thrusts. If she did this, it would turn out this way, and if she did that, it would turn out that way. By the time she noticed the flaw in her movements, the point of the rapier would be flying at her.

Even though the safety equipment would prevent any casualties, the focused power of the point was still very surprising, so every time she was struck she would feel it deep in her bones. The memories of pain made Nina grimace.

"That's no good."

Nina shook her head. No matter how many times she image trained, she could only imagine the scene of her defeat. Her first defeat had been so miserable that Nina felt as if her self-confidence from before coming to Zuellni had been crushed to dust.

She couldn't beat Shin - Nina felt like that idea was being carved into her.

Naturally her hands that gripped the mop didn't stop. Nina was alone. No one was there to catch her slacking, and she leaned herself against the guardrail, looking up at the sky.

Pipes and machinery crisscrossed in complex patterns and were swallowed up by darkness. That was because their interweaving kept continuing to places higher than the light reached.

She should change the mood - though Nina thought this, Shin's other words emerged in her mind.

A group of misfits.

That's what Shin had been expressing. Though she didn't know what he meant about ordinary people, if you only looked at the Military Artists, it did seem that there were many of those who came - or perhaps, were allowed to come - to the Academy City.

The city residents wouldn't be happy about able Military Artists leaving to go to other parts of the world.

Nina hadn't thought of that before. Nina had been solely driven by her desire to see the outside world. But thinking carefully, she also felt like her father's words of opposition had been about the same as Shin's.

Her father had felt bad for Nina, which was why he hadn't clearly said that.

(There's no need to worry.)

Though Nina had thought that, it really had been a big problem for her father.

Nina's mother was an ordinary person. To a family that continued producing Military Artists generation after generation,

they wouldn't want the blood of an ordinary person to mix into the family lest they be unable to produce the next generation of Military Artists. But her father had pushed away the cries of opposition and married Nina's mother.

Nina had two older sisters, but they were ordinary people.

Apparently, when the third child Nina had been born as a Military Artist, the people around had actually breathed a sigh of relief. Her parents often said this, maybe believing that the children wouldn't understand.

That mother had died when Nina was young.

After that, her father had remarried. With a female Military Artist.

The child that the two of them had was a Military Artist.

And a male.

Maybe it was natural for their expectations to be focused on her little brother. Since her little brother's Military Artist blood was far denser than Nina's.

Nina didn't hate her stepmother or her little brother, and Nina hadn't thought much of succeeding the Antalk family. She believed that it was fine if her little brother wanted to succeed it.

But actually, Nina's father had felt guilty about that matter. Maybe that was why he hadn't been able to seriously talk to Nina.

(There's no need to worry.)

She murmured to herself.

She had just wished her father could express his opinions more sincerely and not use a roundabout way of talking. Nina's bad habit was to decide things in the blink of an eye, and her eyes only looked towards her goals. Though she was aware of that, she couldn't change her hopeless personality. Nina had felt that nuanced rhetoric shouldn't be used at that kind of time, and that only direct talk would work.

Because Nina hadn't realized the truth.

(No, right now isn't the time to think about that.)

The battle with Gattman was right in front of her, so Shin was thoroughly honing Nina.

She had to focus more.

But Shin's remark had stabbed into Nina's chest even deeper than she thought.

It was like having someone tell her that the place she had dreamed of wasn't actually all that.

Of course, Shin was very strong, and everyone in the fourteenth platoon looked to be good people. Nina couldn't think that these people had left their hometowns due to various problems. But on

the other hand, there were also people like Gattman. Though there had been such people in Schneibel, Nina hadn't ever seen them forming groups to do bad things before.

Also, if Academy Cities had places for those people to screw around.....

She didn't want to think about it - Nina shook her head.

Wasn't the question about why she was in this kind of place emerging in her mind?

The less she tried not to think about it, the worse her mood became. Nina's obstinate personality was showing its flaw of being very hard to perk herself back up.

"Ugh..."

Nina tried to rid herself of those thoughts, and ended up hitting the back of her head against the guardrail.

Just then, something strange happened.

A noise that made Nina think of the noise during breaks still hadn't reached her, so she hastily grabbed the mop and started mopping the floor. The group making noise seemed to be moving, but wasn't moving towards her.

"What's going on?"

Judging by the feel of the sound, it seemed like something had gone wrong..... Nina tilted her head and put on a confused

expression as she continued cleaning. A sharp pain came from the back of her head. When had she become like this? As Nina became even more confused by her strange impulse, a color in her vision changed.

The dim beam of light was mixed with a pale blue.

"Hmm?"

A change appeared in the air brushing past her nose. That smell was a lot like an aroma that made Nina extremely nostalgic.

Nina turned around and looked up as if being pulled by something.

Right there.

The figure of a tender, incredibly delicate little girl.

Her long hair was spread out and gave off a pale blue light like water.

"An Electronic Fairy....."

Nina realized the reason the air had changed. It was because factors scattered by the Electronic Fairy were mixed into the air.

it was an air that she often felt in Schneibel.

"Are you Zuellni?"

After Nina asked, the young Electronic Fairy slowly descended to Nina's eye level. Her round eyes filled with curiosity were right before her.

"I see, so those people were looking for you just now."

The people responsible for maintenance work would definitely panic if the Electronic Fairy left the Mechanical Department.

Perhaps hearing Nina's words, but perhaps not understanding the meaning of those words, the girl moved closer to Nina.

"You need to go back."

Nina gently reached out a hand. Zuellni didn't even look surprised as she leaned onto that hand. Her hand didn't feel any weight, but she felt the strange feeling of aggregated electricity.

Zuellni tilted her head, her eyes widening further.

Before she realized it, Nina felt something warm on her cheeks.

"You can't, since you're already an amazing Electronic Fairy."

Tears streamed forth continuously.

They were tears that she couldn't endure. Maybe this girl might become like that too - thinking of this, she couldn't stop the tears.

Yes, she couldn't forget that incident. Because her life had been saved by an Electronic Fairy.

"I'll protect you."

Nothing else mattered. As long as there was an Electronic Fairy here, protecting it was Nina's sworn duty.

The mission she had burdened herself with.

The moment of the fight arrived.

The location was the practice field that the first-years had used for their competition before. Though they could have fought in a training facility, Gattman had objected. Platoons were already enemies to him, and maybe the training facility that platoon members trained in was the enemy camp.

The special shock absorbers used in Military Artist matches had already been put away, but the fourteenth platoon members reconfigured them appropriately.

Nina stood on one of the shock absorbers facing Gattman.

Gattman stood there wearing his uniform just like always, while Nina had changed to fighting gear. The iron whips in either hand had been fine-tuned by Harley again since before. Harley seemed to have done some introspection after hearing about Nina's situation, but Nina didn't really understand what that meant.

"Then, are you two both ready?"

Shin stood in between the two as they faced each other. He was in charge of being the referee.

Nina nodded, and Gattman also expressed approval.

The knife gripped in his hand looked like it was giving off a demonic light.

"I'm going to turn you into a pincushion again."

Gattman bared his teeth in a smile as he spoke.

"....."

Nina didn't fall for that provocation. She calmly confirmed the weight of the iron whips in her hands. Though they were slightly different, they indeed felt easier to use than before.

(Okay, I can do this.)

In that case, she would be able to move even more like she wanted.

A laugh came from the outfield, and Gattman smiled fiercely. It seemed like he had said something to Nina.

Nina didn't get angry. But she still said this to Gattman as he looked down on her with confident eyes:

"Don't worry, I'll end this battle with one strike."

Gattman seemed unable to laugh at that statement. He was instantly taken aback, and then anger slowly filled his face.

Shin expressionlessly announced for the battle to start.

Gattman was the one to move. It was the same strategy as before, brandishing a Dite knife with large movements to draw her attention. The Kei-covered knife was certainly a threat she couldn't ignore.

Nina also moved her left iron whip.

She blocked the knife, and the external Kei crashed against each other. The air vibrated and shook her eyeballs.

But she could deal with this move as long as she knew the principles behind it.

Gattman's left hand flashed out, releasing throwing knives.

That was a movement Nina had long since known about. Though she knew about this movement, Nina stood still without moving. She had stopped Gattman's knife a few moments faster this time. With that motion, she succeeded in drawing back a few centimels from the exploding shockwave produced. She could keep her vision without turning her face away thanks to that action.

Her left iron whip was easier to use than before thanks to Harley's last adjustment. Nin was able to move in this brief period of time thanks to that.

Also, the more important reason was that Nina had kept enduring Shin's rapid thrusts these past few days.

With perfect timing, Nina succeeded in bringing the fight into the perfect circumstances she had been waiting for.

Nina raised her right iron whip. She ignored the throwing knife, choosing to attack. Nina still couldn't beat Gattman in agility in this kind of close-quarters fight.

But even Gattman couldn't move the moment he attacked from both his left and right sides simultaneously.

Several throwing knives pierced into Nina's body together.

Nina swung her iron whips before the pain flashed through her body.

The victor was decided just like that.

Harley was waiting at the meeting place in front of the information desk.

"How are your injuries?"

Though her uniform covered them perfectly, bandages were wrapped below it. Several of Gattman's throwing knives had pierced her skin, but fortunately they hadn't hurt any important organs.

"I'm alright, although I got scolded."

"Of course."

Harley had also watched the match, and he had accompanied Nina to the hospital.

"That was too reckless."

"It's because I felt like I shouldn't have made it a drawn-out battle. Honestly, I thought of circling to Gattman's left and then hitting him, but I'm still not fast enough."

"But..... Shin-senpai was very angry too."

"I guess so."

If she had just made a slight mistake..... At best, both would be injured, and at worst Nina would be the only one injured and fallen on the ground, so Shin was obviously angry in his position."

"But I was only able to win thanks to Senpai and Harley's help. Thanks."

After saying this, Harley showed a weird expression.

"? What's wrong?"

"Uh, although this is obvious, I'm still not good enough."

After saying this, Harley looked up at the sky.

"Really, so we're both not good enough."

Nina also looked up at the sky. The sky she saw right after leaving the hospital was tinted with the colors of the night.

This sky continued all the way to Schneibel. But if she returned her gaze to the ground, there was nothing familiar there.

This was somewhere new.

A brand-new place, without the chains that had been there since her birth.

"Don't you think that's why hard work has value?"

Harley moved his gaze, looking at Nina. Though he was a bit surprised, he immediately nodded vigorously.

"Since we've only just started."

After murmuring this, Nina strode out straight forward over the road laid out before her.

Barbeque Pop

The name of this student dorm was 'Laloide'.

Toilets, bathrooms, kitchens, and laundry machines were shared.

This male dorm was noteworthy for having cheap rent, even among the student dorms in Zuellni's residence area. It was as if only poor students would gather here.

That was why this kind of thing happened sometimes.

"Who ate my yogurt!?"

It was breakfast time. The students getting ready to go to school hurried back and forth through the hallway of Laloide, and Layfon's voice echoed through the hallway.

There were several refrigerators placed in front of the bathroom entrance. Layfon was standing in front of one of them. In his hands was a container made of insulating glass and the name 'Layfon' written in big letters on the lid.

Several of the students gathered in front of the bathroom looked towards Layfon.

Among them, there were people who tried silently leaving while pretending not to care, but Layfon's sharp gaze didn't overlook them.

"You there!"

"Ugh!"

"Uuu....."

He instantly pointed a finger at them. The two of them groaned and stopped. Though they were of different ages, the two of them were in the same year as Layfon.

".....Did you eat it?"

"Uh, no, well....."

"Let me explain, Alseif-san."

Layfon raised the empty container in front of the flustered two.

"To think you'd even eat the culture. That means it won't even grow if I add milk, you know?"

"Uh, yogurt can grow?"

"That was the reason I put it in an insulating case."

"Ohh, that's surprising."

"Lactobacillus[2] is amazing."

"No, that doesn't matter at all. Give me money to buy a new culture."

"....."

"....."

The two of them clearly averted their eyes from Layfon's outstretched hand and started to whistle.

"Hey!"

"We have no money!"

"We don't have food either!"

"Even if you tell me that so proudly....."

"There's no helping it, since we spent all our money on that event before!"

"By 'that event', you mean..... Van Allen's Day? How much money did you spend for you to become broke!?"

Van Allen's Day referred to an activity in Zuellni held between males and females.

"Those of us without a fixed partner went to eat together. We spent a lot on a kind-of-expensive place, so we used all our money! "

"You have to plan better when using money."

To think his important morning nutrition had fallen to such a thing.....

After Layfon said this resignedly, the two of them glared fiercely at him.

No, even the people watching the commotion around him were glaring at him.

"What do you mean!"

"You don't understand!"

"Yeah, you shitty popular guy!"

"Damn!"

"How am I a popular guy!?"

The suddenly-roused group around him banded together to put pressure on Layfon.

"Don't you get bentos almost every day!?"

"Yeah!"

"We all know that girl called Meishen makes them for you!"

"I won't let a guy like you look down on our Van Allen's Day plans!"

"I'm properly paying for the ingredients!"

Layfon let out a grieved appeal as he somehow transformed from the victim into a villain, but he didn't get any sympathy from anyone.

"It's your fault."

After his training on the practice battlefield ended, Layfon inadvertently told Sharnid about the events from this morning, but then he told Layfon this.

"Why? I was the one who had my yogurt eaten, right?"

"No, ignore the matter of having no money for now."

Sharnid scratched his head with a troubled look.

"I'll be honest, there are too many charming girls around you..... That's what the other guys think."

"Huh?"

"Well, there's that group of three you're close to in a place easy for those guys to see. The meek Meishen, the big-sisterly Naruki and the lively Mifi. Meishen's probably the most popular, but the three of them are all more attractive than average. Do you understand that?"

"Hmm, well....."

"And not only is a first-year brat like you a platoon member, the platoon even has Nina and Felli-chan."

"Uh, even if you tell me that....."

"Try thinking about it. Do you think the guys fighting on Van Allen's Day would permit you to get along so well with those cute babes every day?"

"Uh, what do you mean 'fighting'....."

"Those guys are fighting, you know. It's a never-ending war between guys and girls."

"I..... I feel like I get it, but I feel like I don't get it....."

"Understand it! Use your soul!"

He felt like Sharnid's fervent shout was a bit different from his normal style. That put Layfon at a loss.

".....Senpai, did something happen to you?"

"Hahaha, you're so foolish, Layfon. How could anything happen to me."

He did say that, but why was his voice so dull?

"Listen. From an observer's standpoint, you look like you're a winner of life."

"A winner of life..... Huuh?"

Sharnid said that Layfon was a winner of life. Even if he tried looking back over his life ten years ago, Layfon definitely didn't think he had won against anyone.

"It's not important at all what you think!"

Even if Sharnid asserted this so confidently, Layfon could only tilt his head and put on a confused expression.

"But I haven't gone out with anyone or anything. Everyone's just a friend."

After saying this, Layfon's looked at Layfon with wide eyes for a long while, then sighed deeply.

"Hey, Layfon. Maybe you're really amazing as a Military Artist, but in terms of people, your manliness points are the lowest."

"What are manliness points!?"

"Manliness points are manliness points."

Sharnid brought forth mysteriously powerful rhetoric, and this conversation was ended here.

To be honest, Layfon felt a bit hurt.

Layfon didn't completely understand the manliness points that Sharnid had proclaimed, but he felt like Sharnid had been saying that he was a failure a person.

(Uh, am I a failure?)

Layfon listlessly walked alone on the road back home. He had returned to the training facility to train Nina today as well. The surroundings had already darkened, and he was getting hungry. Layfon vaguely felt like his stomach seemed to be worsening his feelings of misery.

Nina didn't have to go to work in the Mechanical Department today, and although she had proposed eating dinner with Layfon, Layfon had refused the invitation. Layfon would occasionally eat dinner with his fellow platoon members if the time he went back home from the training facility coincided with dinnertime, but it was nighttime right now, and Layfon's pockets were pretty empty, even if they weren't as destitute as everyone in the dorm. He had to go buy some ingredients from a store and make food himself.

(They shouldn't take my ingredients from the refrigerator, right ?)

Perhaps it was related to it being a male dorm, but the guys in the dorm used the kitchen very rarely, and almost all who went there did so in order to get hot water to cook fast food. Maybe that was why Layfon would never get stolen from when he stocked up on ingredients during sales.

(.....I'm not a failure because I'm too pragmatic, right?)

If that were the case, what should he do? Layfon felt powerless.

Come to think of it, the fact that he was very amazing as a Military Artist wasn't any consolation at all to Layfon.

Layfon had come to Zuellni in order to abandon his identity as a Military Artist. He had left his original city Grendan due to various reasons, but there would be no reason at all to come to an Academy City if he had planned on continuing to live as a Military Artist. Every city would immediately accept him once he showed his skills.

Layfon had that much confidence in himself.

But Layfon couldn't think of any other areas in which he could brag about. Maybe it was praiseworthy for being a guy his age who could cook, but Layfon wasn't a culinarian like Meishen, nor could he manage nutrition as well as Leerin could. He was pretty much very casual about cooking.

His thoughts were all focused on platoon matches and his daily work, and had slacked off on working hard to achieve his initial goals.

(This won't do.)

As expected, his mood became dejected after thinking about these things.

(I have to do something.)

But what should he do? Layfon couldn't think of the answer and just returned to his dorm.

Though he didn't have an answer, an opportunity came from an unexpected place.

After he returned to his dorm to take care of dinner, Layfon went to his room to rest for a while, but someone ended up knocking on his door and saying that the dorm residents were to gather for a meeting.

On the first floor of the dorm and next to the kitchen was a spacey cafeteria and lounge, and the dorm residents would gather there to kill time when they were free. There was only an electric water heater there, and everything else had to be brought over by the residents. The regulars of the lounge had brought their own mugs and drink powders there.

There had only been a few people sitting in the corner when Layfon had eaten dinner in the lounge before, but when Layfon looked over now, it was already full of dorm residents and there were even people standing due to lack of seating. Layfon also stood by a wall near the entrance.

"Well, most of us are here."

The dorm head stood up in the lounge.

"Maybe some of you gathered here have already vaguely noticed the reasons. Laloide has a small problem right now."

"A small problem?"

Someone spoke up, and the sound of mixed laughter and scoffing made the lounge atmosphere become chaotic. Layfon had a recollection of the student who spoke. He was a senpai, one of the few comrades who used the kitchen like Layfon.

"The problem of the fridges."

The dorm head raised his hand to quell the commotion, announcing with easy-to-understand words:

"Though there have always been people who were very loose about property rights, the reports have been particularly numerous this month. The residents can't live like this, so I wanted to punish those people by expelling from the dorm. But throwing destitute people into the streets won't resolve the problem. Especially since this time, there are a lot of people who will be able to get along as long as they make it through the month."

A lot of the students in the lounge nodded at the dorm head's words.

(Honestly, exactly how much did everyone spend on Van Allen's Day?)

Those nods meant that everyone agreed with the dorm head's words. In other words, there were that many students who had spent money on Van Allen's Day for the 'war between guys and girls' that Sharnid had mentioned.

Though Layfon felt that this was absurd, maybe the guys of this world didn't think so. Layfon couldn't help but feel like he was the side in the wrong, so he couldn't say anything.

As Layfon thought about these things, the dorm head said something that was even harder for him to believe:

"I think that many people are looking for part-time work, but the entire city is like that right now, so almost all of the job opportunities are filled."

(Meaning that the male students of the academy filled them all?)

Layfon remembered that the atmosphere among the guys in the classroom had recently been clearly divided into happy and gloomy.....

The dorm head continued speaking:

"But the problem won't be resolved even if you continue staring at the recruitment posters. I got information through my contacts and ended up finding a job. It's a job that requires a large amount of manpower. If all the people here alternate every day, it should be more than enough to deal with that job. Also, meals are provided."

The sentence added at the end made and "Ohh" rise up in the lounge.

"It's a labor job, and honestly I think it's going to be very tiring, but if you're interested, you can do it. I'll explain the details next, so everyone please listen carefully and then make your own decision. Also, starting tomorrow, I'm going to deal with thieves very harshly, so please be aware. Then....."

With that, the dorm head started explaining the contents of the job.

"Ohh, it reached your dorm too?"

It was honestly a coincidence that he ran into Formed the next day on his way to school. He looked pallid due to staying up the whole night for a certain matter, but happened to show up on Layfon's way to school.

"There's a problem over at the breeding lake, so I didn't have any time to sleep."

Formed looked resentfully at the sun, then rubbed his eyes.

He had been up for the whole night, but Formed still didn't give up on going to school. He seemed to remember Formed proclaiming that 'the primary duty of a student is to study hard'. That kind of proclamation seemed pure and diligent when compared to his crafty demeanor during his city police work, but there had been no trace of a lie on his face when he had professed that.

"It seems like the pastures need a lot of manpower."

The dorm head had revealed the information that the pastures of the Aquaculture Department were severely lacking manpower, and hence they were looking for workers.

The word aquaculture originally referred to the production of aquatic resources, but in Zuellni livestock were also included in this department.

"Yeah. Well, I'm majoring in aquatics, so I don't really understand land-based things. But it seems like they're

experimenting with a new way to raise livestock. Some kind of flu broke out on that pasture, and tests about whether human illnesses can spread to the livestock or about what to do if they do get infected haven't been finished, so they decided to have those people leave for now. It seems like someone proposed to let third-year or lower underclassmen be temporary workers, so they're going to hold a short explanation of the experiment. Even underclassmen will be face with a choice of departmental major after becoming a fourth-year, so this isn't bad."

Formed explained dully with a fatigued face:

"The guys who caught the virus have already been quarantined, and they're being taken care of other people in the department, so you don't need to worry. Speaking of which, are you participating in the job?"

"Only on weekends."

"......You don't look like someone who spent money because of Van Allen's Day."

The fact that Formed said that meant that almost all the guys in Zuellni were short on money this month.

"I didn't do that, I'm just interested in the experiment."

"I thought so."

The yawning Formed didn't seem like the person to do anything on Van Allen's Day. Actually, he had been investigating a

certain matter with Layfon that day, so he shouldn't have had time to do anything.

"Well, they're almost ready to put the product on the market. Incidentally, you might have an opportunity to try taste-testing."

Formed parted with Layfon, carelessly dropping those words.

Right, a taste-testing.

Livestock wasn't just labor, it also had its dirty side - cleaning up feces. The dorm students had all showed bitter faces when they had first imagined that. But when the dorm head expressed that after a week of work ended, a taste-testing would be held on the last day with all the workers invited, everyone's attitudes had turned around a hundred and eighty degrees.

They could eat meat. There was no better reward for that group of destitute, hungry men. Though Layfon was a bit concerned about taste-testing new products, even he also wanted a big piece of high-quality protein.

So even Layfon was a bit excited as he walked.

In the blink of an eye, the weekend was coming. In this period of time, Layfon had seen the dorm residents who were participating in the work returning to the dorm with exhausted faces. The work process of the people who normally participated in the job was to stay at the pasture the night before, then start work early in the morning, then go to class, and continue working after school.

Layfon's work time was on the two weekends when he didn't have to go to class. Though he had to work the entire day, the pay was also very generous. It was Layfon's first experience with this kind of work, and maybe it would be more laborious than he had thought, but he was excited by the anticipated wages.

More importantly, Layfon was also slightly looking forward to that side of the job.

After all, though the returning dorm students were extremely tired, they looked quite enriched. Though there were many people who complained that they weren't suited to the job, their faces showed enrichment apart from their weariness. Everyone clearly expressed that the food was very delicious. Allegedly, those who stayed at the pasture had been served freshly-squeezed milk and just-made ham, and both had been delicious.

But if that were the case, what about the others?

(Maybe working on the pasture is very fun?)

Layfon held those expectations in his heart. A noise he wasn't used to woke Layfon up.

Layfon had gone straight to his workplace at the Aquaculture Department pasture after cleaning the Mechanical Department last night. Since it was late at night, the trams weren't even operating. Layfon had walked to the living quarters on the pasture and then fallen asleep.

There was work before breakfast, too.

First was feeding the livestock. Though it was feeding, it wasn't the kind of hay-feeding work that he imagined.

"These guys mainly eat lichen."

The Aquaculture Department senpai in charge of instructing them said.

"Like that forest over there. There's a forest spreading outwards from the central Yuusuiju[3] in the center. It's very dense inside, a treasure trove of lichen. These guys have been bred to feed off of this."

The senpai said this and then introduced the livestock. They huddled together inside the fenced enclosure. They were animals with blackish-gray coats of fur that looked like deer.

They seemed to be called 'khufu'.

In front of the pen were the dorm residents who wanted to work on the weekend like Layfon. There were some unfamiliar faces here, since students from outside Layfon's dorm had also signed up for this work.

There were about three or four workers for each instructor.

"Your job is to bring these guys into the forest."

When the instructor said that, he made it seem like the work would be very easy. But actually, this job wasn't that simple.

The instructors assigned the khufu in the gates to Layfon and the others. After the instructor used a thin, whiplike thing to strike the khufu's flank, they obeyed his instructions very easily.

Layfon was assigned five khufu, and the other works were assigned a similar number.

"You have to get them back without harming them. Once these guys start eating, it's not easy to make them leave."

The instructor circled around behind Layfon and the others.

Everyone took up the whiplike objects they had been given and followed behind the khufu.

It looked very simple. But everyone immediately learned that they had thought incorrectly.

"Ah, hey!"

"Wait, hold on!"

"Uwah, uwahhh!"

The workers around him panicked.

The group of khufu planned on going wherever they pleased, rather than moving towards the destination forest. Some tried to deal with this quandary with their whips, but they didn't pay them any heed. There were even people who grabbed the horns that grew on their heads to try to stop them by force, but they just ended up getting dragged along.

"These guys can even run carrying someone along. Well, people generally shouldn't try to compare their strength with animals. Also, don’t stand right in front or right behind them."

The instructor warned everyone with a laid-back tone. Layfon felt like that remark was a bit too late, but there was no ill intent on his face, he was just laid-back. The khufu were generally gentle animals, and although the workers tried to stop them, the movements threw the workers off weren't violent. But the differences in strength were clear, so those people could do nothing about them.

The khufu assigned to Layfon also went in a different direction.. .... In addition, they had even turned a hundred eighty degrees around to return inside the pen.

What should he do..... Thinking this, Layfon looked around, and ended up noticing that there were also khufu moving towards the destination forest without difficulty. As Layfon watched this scene, he noticed that although those workers weren't used to it, they were using the whips like the instructor had to return the khufu trying to take a detour back to the pack. If they wanted to make the khufu go in a certain direction, they would use the whips to strike the khufu's flank in the opposite direction.

(I see.)

After Layfon tried lightly striking a Khufu's flank with a flick of his wrist, the Khufu changed its line of movement to the opposite direction. As long as he got the trick to it, the movement ability of

a Military Artist would be worlds apart from that of a normal person. Layfon succeeded in getting the khufu to the forest with smoother movements than anyone else. In addition, he even helped others who were still stuck to lead their khufu.

After this work ended, it was finally time for breakfast.

(Not good.)

After breakfast ended, next was to clean the inside of the khufu-less pen. This was the disgusting first impression that the dorm residents had - the dirty work. They used shovels to dig up the feces that dirtied the ground, then used wheelbarrows to carry it outside. It seemed like these feces would be sent to the Agriculture department for use as fertilizer.

After that business was finished, they moved to a different job. Half of the workers went to the greenhouse where they cultivated the lichen that were planted in the forest, but Layfon was instructed to go to the forest and take care of the khufu.

It looked like they had separated out the people who seemed to have been good at guiding the khufus during the morning work to this side.

(This work is pretty fun.)

Layfon watched over the khufu in the humid forest as he thought this deep in his heart.

The khufu slowly moved about the forest, where even the air seemed to be dyed a lush green, as they quietly ate the lichen growing on the trees and in the shadows of rocks. During this, Layfon tried to keep khufu a suitable distance from each other to keep them from fighting and also moved the khufu who were hogging the lichen away from the forest. It made him strangely happy.

(Maybe I'm very suited to this. Could this be my real career?)

Layfon thought about this half-seriously as he gathered the khufu with an excited mood.

It was because of these feelings that Layfon observed the khufus ' calm states of mind one by one.

There was a khufu who seemed to be the leader of the whole herd, along with several smaller groups led by this one.

(The leader's the Student Council President, then.)

Though they were a herd, they weren't livestock that had always been in Zuellni. So all of the khufu were very young, and it seemed like there weren't many age differences. Layfon imagined the Student Council President's figure over the khufu that led the similarly-aged herd.

And it seemed interestingly appropriate for Layfon to imagine the group assigned to him as the seventeenth platoon that he belonged to. Layfon decided to call the leader of this group a

vice-leader, as it seemed very active. Any time the leader appeared , it would make an aggressive sound, which was very similar to Nina. The one that moved back and forth between the female khufus was Sharnid, and the one that kept its distance from the group and looked uninvolved was Felli.

(Uh..... then I'm.....)

After Layfon looked left and right, his gaze stopped on a single khufu.

It was a khufu that didn't look any different from the others, but it felt like a vaguely unreliable khufu, and the way it walked even looked very weak. When it noticed fresh food and started to eat, it would be pushed aside by other khufu and the food would get stolen away. Unable to watch this go on, the vice-leader gave it some of the food it had found.

(Ohh..... it's me.)

That kind of patheticness is very like me.

It wandered back and forth looking for other food, and ended up being lightly bumped by the horn of the khufu Layfon had labeled as Felli.

"Ahahaha, it's really like me."

Thinking this, Layfon started laughing on his own, then became dejected.

The sun was sinking to the west. After they sent the khufu back to the pen, Layfon's and the others' work came to an end. The workers staying at the living quarters prepared to go back and shower, but the Aquaculture Department senpai told them that there was a place to recuperate next to the forest.

"It's a hot spring that uses the hot water from the Yuusuiju. Though it's fine to use the showers here too, you can get rid of your fatigue over there."

Even though the senpai said something like that, the unfamiliar work of dealing with the livestock had made almost all of them dead tired, so everyone was too lazy to leave the living quarters.

In the end, the only ones to go to the hot spring were Layfon and a few others.

The vast hot spring was made from a rock structure.

"Amazing....."

The walls and ceiling were rounded shapes made from glass. If he looked up inside the white steam, he could glimpse the sky or the scenery of the forest.

After washing himself and soaking in the hot spring, the heat crept into his body. His stiffened muscles felt like they were relaxing.

"Ah, this might not be bad."

The other had all left, but Layfon soaked motionlessly in the hot spring.

With the platoon matches and the training to prepare for the platoon matches alongside his work in the Mechanical Department and classes, Layfon had almost no time to relax his muscles. He felt like internal Kei didn't let him recover completely. The fatigue accumulated in his body slowly dissolved away.

Thinking back, Leerin and his adoptive father had always been responsible for managing his health back in Grendan.

They would give Layfon piping-hot meals as he immersed himself in training and battle, and would tell him to rest when it was time to rest.

Now, he had to do all of that.

"I have to properly manage my body."

Layfon murmured this dully, raising his head and looking up from the hot spring.

The door to the dressing room opened and someone walked in.

"Hmm? Layfon, is that you?"

"Huh? Harley-senpai?"

The person who peeked out from inside the steam was Harley, and next to him was the figure of Kirik walking over while holding a cane.

"What are you doing here?"

"Actually, I should be asking you that."

As Harley and Kirik washed themselves, Layfon told him about everything.

"We're here because we've been shut inside the research lab for the whole week, so we came here to recuperate a little."

"This is a hobby for old people. You just need to sleep to get rid of fatigue."

Kirik stated this, but Harley didn't care at all.

In Zuellni's system, almost everyone who was not a Military Artist spent their first three years in General Studies, and then after becoming a fourth-year they would enter various specialized fields. But only the Alchemy Department could be entered through special exams. Harley had passed that exam and had joined the Alchemy Department as a first-year.

"The hot water here is good for the muscles and nerves. Kirik, maybe it can cure your legs."

"Hmph."

Kirik stared at the glass in front of him with a cold snort. Layfon looked at his face from the side. Though his skeletal features were masculine all over, it seemed like even with that he could quickly become a beautiful girl with clothes and cosmetic surgery.

But it was just his harsh face that was scary. His eyes, which looked like they were always displeased, kept others from approaching him.

Harley was the only one who could stand next to him with a calm expression.

"I hate soaking, so I'm getting out first."

He had only soaked in the hot spring for a brief period of time, but Kirik left the hot spring. As Kirik moved stiffly, holding his cane, Harley just leisurely responded to him without going to help.

"Is that alright?"

Layfon asked after Kirik vanished into the changing room.

"It's fine. If you accidentally try to take care of him too much, it'll just hurt his pride. Though Kirik says what he does, he comes here pretty often, so he probably doesn't hate it here."

Kirik had once been a Military Artist. Because of various incidents in the past, his Kei flow had been obstructed, and he had become paraplegic. Unable to continue being a Military Artist, he

had entered the Alchemy Department and was trying to start his life again.

Though their origins were different, his fate happened to be similar to Layfon's.

Though he wanted to ask Kirik how he had decided on the path of Alchemy, Layfon felt hesitant. Was it really okay to ask such a thing so easily?

Layfon unconsciously thought that in those harsh eyes was something that wouldn't allow others to peer into his heart so easily.

So Harley was very amazing for being able to stand next to Kirik so casually.

After Layfon said this, Harley laughed.

"It's because a lot of things happened with Kirik. Though I think his personality is very hard to get along with, I'm already used to that kind of attitude from Nina."

"Huh? Used to it from the Captain?"

"Nina's the same. Well, though she feels really passionate now, she wasn't like that before. She was a sheltered daughter of a wealthy family when she was in Schneibel. She gave off a powerful 'don't talk to me' atmosphere, even though she didn't think that way."

"R.....Really?"

"Yeah. My dad was a famous Dite technician in Schneibel, so he often went to Nina's home, and I became close to her through that connection. Honestly, she completely ignored me at the start. It took a lot of work before I could talk with her normally."

But now the relationship between the two of them had already become one where they could chat very normally.

Also, now he had become friends with Kirik.

"Harley-senpai, you're really amazing."

"That's not true, I'm just very honest about my interests. If I weren't able to talk about them, I might not have been able to become friends with either Nina or Kirik."

Harley simply smiled.

But Layfon couldn't do such a thing.

"Whew, I soaked for a bit too long. I'm starting to get dizzy."

The red-faced Harley unsteadily got out of the hot spring. Layfon felt like it was about time for him to leave, so he also stood up.

Just then, a strange cry reached him through the glass.

"Huh?"

"What?"

The two of them looked back together.

They could see the darkness of the thick forest through the glass , and there was a huge figure rushing over on the other side of the glass.

"Huh? Huh?"

"Senpai, get back!"

Layfon instantly stood in a position he could guard Harley and then took a stance.

The figure charged at them violently, as if completely failing to notice that this was a glass window.

A heavy sound boomed through the hot spring room, then there was a silence. The glass was dyed white by the large webbed cracks appearing over its surface.

"Wh.....What?"

"Let's get out quickly."

Layfon spoke up to urge on Harley, who was dumbstruck and unable to move from surprise, and then moved to the changing room.

After he changed and walked outside, there were already people gathered there. They were the students who had used the recuperation spot along with the students who had been sent here by the Student Council as management.

The group of less than ten people checked object that had crashed into the glass.

The object that was illuminated by their electric lights was a khufu.

"How....."

To think such a docile animal had suddenly done something like that at night..... Though they were surprised, everyone checked the identification tag hung around its neck.

This time Layfon went speechless.

The khufu fallen in front of him was the vice-leader of the group Layfon had been in charge of.

The Aquaculture Department students at the pasture quickly took the khufu away, moving it to a medical room in the underground

below the pasture. Though the khufu had already died, they had to inspect it since it had done something so violent as jumping out of the pen and charging into the glass of the recuperation area despite the gentle personality it ought to have as pasture livestock.

The Aquaculture Department senpais' faces were grave, and Layfon and the others, shaken by their demeanors, were also surrounded by the heavy atmosphere.

(The Captain.....)

Layfon felt a twinge of pain in his chest when he thought of the fallen khufu. Of course, he realized that the khufu wasn't actually Nina. But the khufu that had made Layfon feel like maybe the pasture work suited him had become like this. The pain that Layfon felt in his chest was genuine.

Not long afterwards, a weary-faced senpai appeared. The senpai was studying veterinary science in the Aquaculture Department, and he had been called here for that purpose.

"The cause of death was cervical damage, and I can't tell the reason it went out of control. But....."

That senpai furrowed his brow.

"Hole-shaped wounds that couldn't have been caused by the impact have appeared on its belly and viscera. Though the reason might be parasites, I can't find any signs of those parasites. But there are certainly traces of something on the organs."

"We have regular inspections for parasites."

"I understand. I'd also like you to reveal those records. But there are certainly wounds that couldn't be produced by anything other than parasites or such on it. That's the only possibility if it was an external reason that made it go out of control."

"Hey. Hold on. In that case--"

The Aquaculture Department senpai groaned in lamentation.

"......We have to suspend the shipment until we figure out the cause, and at worse we'll be prohibited from breeding them."

This time the senpais clearly groaned.

"Hey!"

"This isn't a joke, we've come this far!"

"But if we don't figure out the cause, things will turn out that way no matter what. Do you understand? If there are parasites there, they're eating the khufus' organs. You can't guarantee that they won't eat human organs."

The veterinarian's remark made a commotion rise up among the workers standing behind and listening. They were probably imagining themselves eating something like that during the taste-testing.

But the prohibition part was more shocking to Layfon than the taste-testing. The reason that these khufu were being raised was

for food, so it was long since decided that their lives were to be used as food for humans. But the prohibition changed things.

The khufu that had made Layfon feel such a strong sense of closeness would be killed without being able to complete their mission.

"But it's still not certain that there are parasites, right?"

One senpai's words made the veterinarian nod his head.

"Yeah. But I can't be sure that there aren't parasites. After all, the possibility is just there. If there are parasites, we'll have to find them and take countermeasures. If there aren't, we'll have to find proof that there aren't parasites. In any case, we'll have to inspect the other khufu."

"Ah, can you hold on a bit?"

As the senpais' faces darkened, that voice broke in between them.

"Harley-senpai?"

Layfon turned around. The people who appeared there were Harley, Kirik, and one other person.

"You guys are?"

"Alchemy Department third year Harley Sutton. I want to inspect the corpse, may I?"

"What does that mean?"

"When I saw the corpse from the recuperation area, there was something that felt strange to me."

"Senpai.....?"

After Layfon spoke up, Harley waved at him with a smile no different from normal.

"Sorry, sorry, it took some time for me to get others to bring equipment here."

"Why don't you put yourself in the shoes of the guy who had to bike all the way over here."

The other student said with a weary expression. Maybe he was someone in the same research lab as Harley.

"Hey, you guys....."

"We said that we wanted to inspect the corpse just now because its cause of death was probably caused by humans."

Kirik glared at the Aquaculture Department students with a sharp look from his wheelchair.

"It's also possible that it's a crime. If you'd like the city police to be here to witness it, you'd better hurry up and contact them.

It seemed like there were people who felt opposed to Kirik's remark, but the veterinarian was the first to back off and avoid starting a dispute.

Layfon could only stare blankly at the changing situation while he watched Harley and the others vanish into the medical room.

Before Harley and the others came out from the medical room, Formed and the others from the city police, whom the senpai had contacted, arrived on the scene.

After noting that Layfon was here, Formed and the Aquaculture Department senpai vanished into the medical room together.

"How's the situation?"

Layfon asked Naruki, who had come as well.

"There's been trouble recently with thievery of Aquaculture and Agriculture new product intellectual property."

"Ah....."

Those words made Layfon think of Formed's complaint from before that many problems had been going on.

"It seems like we've had a lot of problems with new products entering the markets early. It would be normal if it were only one or two incidents, but this time there are too many cases. So we've been constantly investigating the situation."

After Naruki said this, Harley, Formed, and the others walked out.

"As for the incident this time, there's an extremely high chance that it's a case of information theft."

Those words made the Aquaculture Department senpais put on bitter expressions. Though it was a relief that the khufus they had raised weren't diseased, it made them sad to think there might be people using sinister means to steal their genetic information.

"Starting now, we're going to conduct and resolve this matter as a case of information theft."

After proclaiming this, Formed instructed his subordinates to leave the pasture.

"Senpai!"

Layfon chased after them.

"What, do you want to help?"

"Yeah, I'm very mad about this case."

After Layfon said this, Formed raised his brows and put on a very surprised expression.

"Well, it's possible that we'll immediately make an arrest this time, with someone like you so determined."

"Senpai, do you have any suspects?"

"When information theft happens, the city police will first check the list of people who used the living quarters. That's the theory behind handling these cases."

Formed said this with a cold snort.

"There are a few people who are very suspicious. The biggest problem this time is that we can't use any clear evidence that they're stealing, but we almost have some clues. After that we just need to find the ones who fit those clues and question them."

"But the means of committing the crime....."

"Psychokinesis flakes."

"Huh?"

Harley and the others caught up.

"The culprits put extremely small Psychokinesis flakes inside bugs or small creatures and control them that way. When we inspected the organs of that livestock and others that were sent to the Alchemy Department because of strange deaths, we ended up noticing that there was still Psychokinesis in them, although the amounts were very miniscule. Though we're just inferring the suspect from that, it's probably not wrong."

"You can do that?"

"I'm not a Psychokinesist myself, so I can't say anything about whether anyone can do such a thing. But I don't think it's impossible to use Psychokinesis lightning to drive muscle current. Or they're not controlling the muscle, but rather using current to manipulate the brain. We've thought of a lot of ways, and if we can think of these it means that there might be people already doing them."

"I see."

Harley and the others had made this conclusion after their alchemical inspections, so Formed could find suspects based off of that conclusion.

In that case, the culprit was him.

"Leave it to me, I'll definitely capture him."

"......Well, keep it reasonable."

Formed looked at the motivated Layfon in surprise.

When he reached the residence, Layfon received the instruction to stand by.

Come to think of it, Layfon hadn't brought his Dite here. He had just planned on working at the pasture, and the school regulations said to avoid carrying a Dite during holidays.

"Harley-senpai, is there anything I can use?"

After explaining the story, Harley and Kirik put on speechless expressions.

"Do you have any self-awareness as a Military Artist?"

"There aren't many people who follow the rules so diligently. Uh, do we have anything?"

"There should be some unrefined materials in the toolbox. Hold on."

Harley, Kirik, and another person started working.

"We'll use a city police baton as the base material. Hey, bring it over."

"There's no Sapphire in the toolbox, we only have enough Ruby. "

"The settings will become pretty arbitrary. What kind of weapon would be best to finish work on in five minutes?"

The three of them debated as they broke down the Dite they had gotten from a city police Military Artist, adding new materials to it and then restructuring it.

"Hey, why don't we try out this test product on the side?"

"I think the rate of Kei loss is too severe."

"It's fine, it's fine, it's no problem for Layfon's maximum instantaneous release amount. Let's try it."

"Huh, what is it? Please wait."

"It’s alright, it's alright, we'll make something very interesting, so just hold on."

"No, I should be the one telling you to hold on."

"There's no time now, and we'll be able to directly apply a program if we use this thing. Also, you'll be able to use it immediately with just some slight adjustments."

"Let's just gather some experimental data on the side."

The three of them didn't care to listen to Layfon at all. Harley's hands typed on a keyboard with frightening speed as he entered data.

As the three of them busied themselves, there was movement from the residence.

"Retreat, retreat!"

Formed's shout came from the residence, and a sense of tension shot through the Military Artists on standby.

"Here, Layfon."

Layfon didn't have any time to protest, no matter what exactly they had made. Layfon accepted the object they gave him and started running.

The object in his hand was a strangely-shaped Dite. It didn't have a covering, so all of its machinery was exposed outside. Wiring crawled on the black base material like blood vessels, and a red-colored ore was installed on its point.

Formed and the negotiators spilled out from the residence exit that Layfon headed to. This time they hadn't gotten any perfect evidence, so Formed had said he would negotiate with the criminal himself and make him confess.

He had probably succeeded.

An irritating sound came from behind Formed and the others as they stumbled out, and countless bugs also appeared.

They weren't just bugs. There were also birds flying in the air and large rats crawling over the ground. The criminal couldn't have transported such a large quantity of bugs and animals through a roaming bus, so he had probably used animals from Zuellni.

Also, Harley's alchemical speculation had hit the mark.

The bugs spread outwards like moving sensors, attacking all the police surrounding the residence.

"I can't let you get away, criminal."

Layfon murmured the restoration keyword, infusing the Dite with Kei.....

".....Huh?"

The Dite absorbed a large quantity of Kei that gave Layfon goosebumps.

The Dite didn't explode or become heavier.

It ignored the changes that ought to happen, and released a huge flow of energy from the ruby tip.

"W-W-Wha....."

The Dite gripped in his hand maintained its form, but a beam of red energy with no fixed shape appeared at the ruby tip.

"Ohh, it's out, it's out. It looks pretty stable."

"Hmm - well, that's about right."

Kirik and the other muttered these words, but they still reached the internal-Kei-strengthened ears of Layfon.

"Layfon~ This is a Dite that directly turns Kei energy into a weapon, like the compound Dites that Karen Kei users usually use. That's how it is, so good luck."

That voice came from Harley. He didn't particularly raise his voice, anticipating that Layfon would be able to hear him talk.

"I'm not good at using Karen Kei!"

Though Harley and the others didn't hear, Layfon still returned those words. Layfon moved his focus to the unsightly beam of energy.

The key to Karen Kei was to make Kei take form based on one's imagination. Layfon imagined a sword. Though the shape was ugly, it still managed to turn into the form of a sword.

Right now, Layfon was standing between Formed and the bugs. Layfon used the shockwave from his movement to send the rampaging bugs trying to engulf Formed and the others flying from the area.

He swung his sword, using the heat of the red beam to burn the bugs to a crisp.

"It's really hard to use!"

Layfon shouted this after defending against the onslaught of bugs. If it were a normal weapon, a Military Artist using internal Kei should be able to use the shockwaves produced from every movement to blow away the bugs. At this kind of time, it would be most effective to make the shockwaves released from the Kei infused into the weapon as powerful as possible.

But the Kei he was flowing into the Dite right now was all being used to maintain the blade, so it didn't create any shockwaves.

Even so, the shockwaves produced from his movement alone were being put to effective use. But that level of power could just at most keep the bugs from getting close to him, and didn't help much otherwise. Layfon couldn't push the bugs back to the Psychokinesist that controlled them.

Naruki and the city police Military Artists had been stopped by the group of bugs, unable to move even if they wanted to.

"Damn!"

His state of being unable to move forward constantly increased his feeling of impatience.

The enemy of his captain was right on the other side of this group of bugs. He couldn't let any other Military Artists do it. Layfon was the one who would take revenge for his captain (khufu).

(What techniques are there in Karen Kei?)

Layfon fended off the bugs as he dug through his memories. Though there were Heaven's Blade successors who used Karen Kei , the system of moves was far too different from his, so Layfon hadn't observed them that carefully. Even the imagination had to be controlled along with the flow of Kei, so even Layfon had trouble stealing those kinds of techniques.

There was only one technique he could think of quickly.

It was a big technique, one whose difficulty of imagining was about the same as the sword he was using right now, and it seemed like he could use his steel thread techniques to control it.

But the problem was....."

"Whatever! I'll do it!"

An extravagant, idiotic man who liked beauty. Layfon thought of the Heaven's Blade successor Troyatte Gabanest Firandin, grimacing as he used that move.

External-type Kei, Karen Variant - Seven Fangs.

The sword-shaped mass of energy around the ruby explosively increased in size, gradually taking form.

Just that much power blew away the surrounding bugs.

A surprised sound came from around him.

Seven giant snakes appeared there. Bodies as thick as grown men supported serpentine heads and towered arrogantly over the surroundings.

The seven snakes' bodies were connected to the Dite in Layfon's hand.

"Go."

At the same time as Layfon spoke, the seven huge serpents sped towards the residence. Just from being hit by the bodies, the bugs were sucked into the heat of the Kei and burned up one by one.

Layfon sprinted behind the charging serpents.

"There are other people in there!"

Formed's lamenting cry reached his ears from behind.

Even so, Layfon didn't reduce his speed.

Because he saw it.

He saw the figure of a man show his face as he escaped through the back door of the residence.

"So it was youuuuuuuuu!"

"Aaah!"

That man fell on his rear upon hearing Layfon's voice and seeing first-hand the serpents speeding towards him.

"Enemy of my captain (khufu)!"

The serpents bared their fangs, reacting to Layfon's cry. The seeking bodies of erupting energy rushed towards the man.

During that time.....

Bang.

"Ah, it reached its limits."

Harley let out a stunned voice from afar.

What Layfon had been worried about, whether the hastily-constructed Dite was able to endure a large amount of Kei.. ....

It ended up being unable to endure.

Bearing the brunt of the explosion of energy, Layfon lost consciousness as he rapidly flew forward..... and like that, crashed into the man.

Afterwards, the culprit was arrested without trouble.

The self-destructed Layfon managed to get away with light injuries, but he couldn't go to work the next day.

That night, the Aquaculture Department living quarters held the planned khufu taste-testing..... in other words, a barbeque. Of course, it wasn't just khufu - they also used the meat of other livestock that the Aquaculture Department took pride in.

Layfon also took part.

Word of the arrest over at the residence had made it here, and Layfon was warmly welcomed for clearing the khufu of suspicion. Layfon also worked in the kitchen, and his food was well-liked.

(I really should go to the Aquaculture Department after becoming a fourth-year.)

Layfon who thought this had also asked the senpais about the Aquaculture Department.

Though he had looked rather shameful at the end of the arrest, he had still succeeded in enacting revenge for his captain (khufu), so Layfon was able to attend this party with the best of moods.

Full from eating, Layfon headed to the pens where the khufu were kept in order to report his successful revenge.

"......Huh?"

After finding the group he had been in charge of, Layfon tilted his head and put on a confused expression.

"There's no me (khufu)."

Felli (khufu) and Sharnid (khufu), and the other khufus were all there, but Layfon wasn't.

Layfon thought about what was going on.....

".....Ah."

He turned around, seeing the crimson flames scorching the grills over by the living quarters.

He saw the animal placed on that grill.

Layfon held his stomach.

"Eeeeuuuurrrrgh."

Maybe he still needed to think more deeply about going to the Aquaculture Division.

Yeah, Layfon thought so.

Layfon's path still hadn't appeared.

Bus-jack Time

Everyone in the world would occasionally come across this kind of situation..... she thought.

Come to think of it, she belonged to a place where she wouldn't be able to avoid troublesome matters no matter what she did.

".....I want to relax sometimes too."

Felli muttered quietly, but no one actually heard her words.

In contrast, a roar resounded through the area.

"We demand a guarantee of safety until the roaming bus arrives !"

The voice came from outside. It was honestly a pointlessly loud voice - Felli only thought this. The man wore the kind of clothing prioritizing durability that people who were used to traveling wore, but there was a Dite in his hand.

There were five people who held restored Dites like him, and they were surrounding Felli and the others.

"Honestly."

Why had things turned out like this..... Felli sighed.

Come to think of it, the root cause of everything was the fact that her brother Karian, the Student Council president, had been dead tired.

"You said you're overworking yourself?"

Vance, who had come to their home to visit, let out a stunned voice, a voice that passed through the living room and directly reached the kitchen. Though the door to the room was open, his voice was undoubtedly quite loud.

At that time, Felli was cutting a gift cake that she had gotten. The Student Council girls were next to her making tea.

"But it's good that it's not a serious illness."

The female student said this after making tea, then smiled. That expression made Felli think. Felli remembered that this girl had come to her home during Van Allen's Day. Judging by her trained movements in the kitchen, she had used this place back then as well.

"Well, the doctor diagnosed him as being overworked, so it really is an illness."

"An illness of overworking, huh. But it's not that serious, right?"

"The doctor told him to rest for two or three days."

"In that case, it's no big deal."

The girl smiled again.

She put the cake and the tea on a tray and brought them over. Felli followed behind her, tilting her head and putting on a confused expression.

(Was she cheering me up just now?)

That made Felli feel like their positions had been reversed. What exactly was the case?

Didn't this girl have feelings for Karian?

Feeling like she couldn't really understand, Felli went from the kitchen to the living room, picked up the bag placed on the sofa there, and then went to her own room. She had no need to continue looking after the guests who had come for her brother.

Also, what exactly had happened to turn out this way?

The guests had already gone back when she heard the doorknock and Karian announced what had already been decided.

"From tomorrow until Sunday, we're going to go to a health resort to have fun."

That was how things were, Felli and Karian were going to a health resort.

"Why do I have to go too?"

Felli said this without hiding her true feelings of unwillingness. But Karian outright ignored Felli's words and started making preparations on his own.

Felli was generally a very systematic person. Though she was fine with ignoring people, once she learned that it was already a foregone conclusion, she was unable to oppose that decision.

For that reason, Felli appeared the following morning, complaining yet carrying the luggage she would need overnight.

"Well, it's a rare vacation, so you should properly take a break."

Karian leisurely carried a bag as he walked next to her. Though he was dead tired from overwork, Karian didn't look sickly anymore. But Karian's body clearly had a stiffness that didn't match his age from the desk work he always had to focus his mind on. The doctor said that if he didn't relieve that stiffness, it would become a true case of death from overwork[4].

"I'll get better if I relax for two days."

"Is that enough to cure it?"

"Oh my, are you worried about me?"

Felli turned her face away from her brother's happy expression.

"It's because your kind of work is very irregular, so I thought a mere two days couldn't cure anything."

"Hahaha, maybe."

His somewhat self-deprecating laugh made Felli feel very angry .

They arrived at one of Zuellni's health resorts that was very close to the city center.

Though it was a health resort, its 'resort' inclination was relatively stronger. There was a spa, heated pool, and arcade here.

"We didn't have to choose this place....."

The noisy electronic sounds of the arcade came from next to the front desk, which made Felli frown. There were health resorts in quieter areas too.

"It's alright, it's very quiet upstairs."

Indeed, that might be true. But wouldn't this be the worst place in terms of atmosphere? Her brother was already hopelessly clueless - Felli thought this as she got the key and moved to the room.

"Coming here is fine, but....."

After putting her luggage in the room, Felli suddenly thought this.

"What was the point of me coming along?"

Even if they went to the hot spring, it was separated by gender, and Karian's condition wasn't so serious that he needed an attendant. Felli felt like it was meaningless for her to be with him.

Why hadn't she noticed this earlier? Felli felt like she couldn't accept this, which made her feel like something was stuck in her throat.

"Well, I came here, so it's no use thinking about it."

As Felli was convincing herself, the sound of a doorknock rang out.

"Felli, come swim."

Felli sighed loudly and slumped her shoulders, then looked through her luggage.

The pool almost took up an entire floor, but there weren't many people relative to its size. It would be bothersome if there were a lot of people. Felli hoped to spend this vacation quietly if possible. Maybe this location was appropriate, considering this.

After changing into the plaid swimsuit she had brought, Felli occupied a folding chair next to the pool and opened the book she had brought. Since this pool used water from a Yuusuiju, the water

in the pool was warm, and it wasn't cold to wear a swimsuit inside . But it was very humid here, so it wasn't good for the pages of the book. That said, this kind of environment was even worse for electronics.

"Ahh, what a waste."

If she wanted to read, she could have just stayed in her room. But now that she thought about it, Felli wasn't in the mood to go back immediately. Since that would be too troublesome.

What was her brother doing? This floor was separated into several pools, and Karian was in a pool close by. He silently swam freestyle, something unbefitting a person who had come to relax.

In front of her was a very deep diving pool, but there was no one there right now. Felli had chosen this place because she thought that was a good thing, but suddenly, she spotted someone on the top of the diving board.

"That.....?"

It was a familiar figure. A girl wearing a black, competitive-type swimsuit jumped off the diving board without hesitation, then dove towards the water. She spun once, twice in midair and then twisted her body, and finally beautifully extended her hands and feet to enter the water headfirst. The splash was surprisingly small. The rippling water flowed over the sides of the pool, and then was swallowed into the gutters.

Right across from Felli, two girls who seemed to be friends were cheering. The girl, who had gone down so far that it made one wonder whether she had touched the bottom, surfaced.

"Captain."

It was Nina.

"Oh, Felli?"

Nina also noticed her as she got out of the pool.

"How curious, to think I'd be able to run into you outside the training facility."

"Same for you, Captain."

"I come here occasionally. Swimming is pretty good for the body's mobility, and it feels nice."

"Oh, I see."

"Well, although I haven't had the time recently. Well, today and tomorrow are both holidays anyway, and friends from my dorm came with me."

The two girls across from her were those friends, then. Come to think of it, Felli felt like she had seen one of them together with Nina before.

"So, how is it?"

"You mean my brother? If you want to ask him, he's swimming pretty spiritedly over there."

"Hm?"

"No one would believe me if I said he had was dead tired from overwork."

Karian was still swimming in the pool on the other side.

"Ahh, really? I'm glad he's in good spirits."

"? Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing. Do you want to eat lunch together?"

"Hmm."

After checking the time, Felli nodded.

"Then I'll wait for you in the cafeteria upstairs."

"Okay."

After watching Nina return to her friends, Felli went over to Karian to call for him.

When she walked over there, she suddenly recalled the situation just now and felt suspicious.

Though she had only vaguely felt it, Nina had seemed to have an unsettled expression.

Upstairs was a cafeteria that would be entered wearing swimsuits. Nina and the others were already waiting there when she went there with Karian.

"Ah, I'm really sorry for making you wait."

Karian greeted Nina and the others with a side smile, then Nina introduced her friends. The girl with a hip wrap around her waist was Selina, and the bespectacled girl wearing a bikini was called Leu.

Before the food they ordered arrived, Karian very deftly thought up topics to talk about, filling the table with a cheerful atmosphere. Felli couldn't find anywhere to speak up, so she just dully listened from the side.

After their meal, Selina said:

"Right, Felli-san. You don't look too well, are you alright?"

"Huh?"

Felli looked up when Selina said this.

"Really?"

She herself hadn't realized at all.

"Yeah, I think so."

Selina observed Felli with narrowed eyes. From the conversation just now, she was in the Alchemy Department. Felli felt the gaze of a scholar who didn't miss the tiniest detail sweeping over her skin.

"I'm fine."

"In that case, maybe I was just over-thinking it."

Selina nodded, speaking with a drawn-out tone.

Suddenly, Felli noticed that Nina was looking over with a hesitant expression.

Now that she thought of it, Nina had been wearing that kind of expression before too. Felli had interpreted her words as worrying about Karian, but when she replied to that, Nina's response had missed a beat.

(What does this mean?)

Did it mean that her words from back then had been worrying about Felli?

But Karian was the one who was actually exhausted from overwork, and Felli's health wasn't strange at all. She checked her body's condition every day with Psychokinesis.

On that premise, Felli judged that she was fine.

Come to think of it, Felli hadn't even lost any appetite. She always ate very little, but even so, she didn't feel like her appetite had decreased. Even if others said that she didn't look good, she didn't feel anything strange.

"It might be because her skin's so white, but I feel like Felli wouldn't tan easily."

Karian nodded after Nina said this.

"Yeah. I'm the same..... or rather, our whole family doesn't tan, we just get red, and it turns back to normal quickly."

"How enviable. I tan right away, so I have to use sunscreen as soon as summer arrives."

"Yeah, me too."

Leu and Selina looked over admiringly.

".....It's not that good. My skin ends up looking like it's been burnt, and when summer comes, I can't leave the shade."

"Ahh, I see."

Actually, when the moving city moved to a summer region..... when it moved to a region where the sun was out for longer and the average temperature and humidity was higher, he was unable to separate from either sunscreen or the shade.

"Right, Nina-san. Can you swim?"

"Huh? Yeah."

Karian suddenly changed the topic.

"Felli can't swim. This is a good opportunity, so can you teach her?"

"......What are you saying all of a sudden?"

Felli looked at her brother coldly, but his expression didn't change.

"It's true that you can't swim, right?"

"That..... that is true."

"Even if you're a Psychokinesist, you're still a Military Artist, so I think it's best to cut down on the sports that you're bad at."

"True, that might be good."

Nina nodded.

"Then we'll start in a bit."

Nina's eyes flashed, showing her motivation, and Felli sighed quietly.

"So, why do you have to bring that kind of thing over here?"

Felli had trouble concealing her surprise upon hearing Nina's words.

"Why, you ask..... We're going in the pool, right?"

"Uh, that's right."

They were entering the pool to practice..... However, Nina wore a bitter expression for some reason.

"I need this if I'm entering the pool."

"Uh, do you know what we're doing next?"

"What do you mean? We're practicing swimming."

"In that case, you don't need that."

Nina's gaze pointed at the life ring that Felli held in one hand.

"But I won't be able to float without this, right?"

"Don't worry, you'll be able to float with practice."

Nina took away the life ring as she rubbed her temple, which made Felli feel very restless. Speaking of which, things like humans weren't originally made to float on water. Drowned corpses would sink and only float back up when they had rotted to a certain degree, right? As for people who looked to be floating on the water, they had just learned a style of swimming to make them look like they were floating, and would sink once they stopped that technique.

"I'll die."

Felli tried putting those thoughts into concise words, but--

"It's not that deep."

Nina also returned a concise counter. Indeed, it looked like the bottom of this pool was much shallower than the one used for diving. Maybe the depth of the water would only go up to around Felli's shoulders.

"Also, I'll borrow this."

Nina picked up a kickboard that was by her feet.

"First are warm-up exercises, then we'll start by getting you used to the water."

Like that, Felli entered the pool under Nina's instruction.

Though the water was warm, the temperature was mild.

"Then let's first practice kicking."

"Okay."

"Before you use the kickboard, I'll pull on your hands first. Kick the water with your feet, and keep your body as flat on the water as possible. Let's go."

As Nina held her hands, Felli kicked the water as instructed. Her body floated up with the resistance imposed by the water coupled with the force produced from her kicking and Nina's pulling force.

"Okay, keep moving your legs like that."

Nina's voice reached her in between the sound of water. Since the water splashed on her face and she had closed her eyes, Felli couldn't really tell what the current situation was. In any case, Felli just moved her legs.

"Right, you're doing well."

Nina's encouraging voice sounded muffled. Felli didn't know anything other than the feeling of being pulled, the water resistance when her legs moved, and the sudden feeling of lightness when her feet left the water.

"Okay, it's about time to lift your head and breathe."

(Breathe.)

Indeed, she had been needing to breathe recently. Though she didn't know how long she would have to kick for, she had to breathe, right?

(Breathe.....)

Her air-seeking lungs became more and more painful.

(Breathe.....)

"Hey, bring your head up."

(Bring my head.....)

Felli was no longer able to hear Nina's voice clearly through the interfering sound of water. Her vision, which was dark because her eyes were shut, was slowly tinted with a different kind of black .

"As I thought, I need the life ring."

"So you're still insistent on it."

Felli, who had been pulled above water in the nick of time, tried saying this, but Nina just cut her off with a bitter expression.

It ended up that she hadn't touched the kickboard at all that day , and she had just been practicing breathing from start to finish.

"What a miserable day."

After having dinner, Felli went back to her room and collapsed on the bed very early. Moving underwater had sapped the strength from her body.

She should sleep. Felli didn't even have the mental strength to resist her heavy eyelids, and her physical strength also relaxed.

(As I thought, something's still weird.)

As she was lured into the world of sleep, Felli thought about the words that emerged in her mind.

Karian had come here to rest, but he had been swimming vigorously, and the girl who ought to have feelings for her brother hadn't seemed worried. Also, Nina's attitude was a bit strange.

"But....."

Felli murmured blankly. Her sleepiness became stronger, and Felli couldn't even clearly tell whether she had actually murmured anything or not.

It seemed that the swimming practice she wasn't used to had really fatigued her body, even though platoon training had more overall exercise. Though Felli was very laid-back with her individual training, she also took part in the self-defense training.

(I don't know what's weird at all.)

After thinking this, Felli fell into a deep sleep.

The instant her sleep turned shallow, someone's words entered her ears. Felli calmly realized that she was currently in a room of the

health resort, so there shouldn't be people around. There was no one other than her here, so she shouldn't have heard a voice.

(A dream?)

Felli thought this as she listened to the voice that reached her.

"As I thought..... Something's weird."

"Careful, she might be hearing this."

"But this is really....."

"It's actually happened, so we can't let her stay..... Coming here was just a temporary measure, since we need to buy time."

"But is it really all that....."

"It's necessary..... Honestly, my wallet was hit pretty hard thanks to her. Well, there aren't many guests who stay here, which is a big help. I'm glad I..... beforehand."

"Isn't.....?"

"No, this is a necessary action..... So, if we're here for the whole day, the situation should take a turn for the better. I'll have to ask you to..... first. I only..... for that purpose."

"......Got it."

The voices seemed to be coming from Karian and Nina.

(What are they saying?)

It was useless to inquire a dream for meaning. Though part of her calmly considered this, Felli still felt curious.

But just as Felli tried eavesdropping, she fell into deep sleep again and her consciousness cut off.

(What exactly was that?)

The first thing Felli did when she woke up was put on a confused expression. Though she felt like it had been a dream, she still remembered that conversation. If she only remembered the contents, it might still be a dream, but Felli felt like it was a bit different from a dream.

(But Captain and my brother couldn't have been in the same place that late.....)

Also, since the voices had reached her ears, it meant the two of them had been in this room. That meant Nina and Karian had come to this room for a secret conversation while Felli was sleeping.

.....No matter how she thought about it, such a thing didn't seem real.

(As I thought, it was a dream.)

The two of them definitely didn't get along poorly. That said, they couldn't have deliberately talked about some serious matter

in private. Speaking of which, the two of them didn't get along well enough to want to be alone with the other.

Then it must have been an ordinary dream that she remembered unusually well.

(Right, that's definitely it.)

Accepting that way of thinking, Felli changed her clothes.

"......Ah."

After finishing her round of morning hygiene, Felli noticed that she had forgotten to bring her Dite.

After changing her clothes, Felli would always restore her Dite and check her health, a routine that she always did every day.

Come to think of it, she hadn't done that yesterday either. Felli had been urged to make preparations for coming here, so she hadn't had time for it. Though she felt like she had brought her Dite with her, she must have forgotten it back then.

"Well, it's just one day anyways."

In any case, it wasn't anything huge - thinking this, Felli left her room to eat breakfast.

"Okay, today we're training too!"

"......Why are you here today too?"

Felli had been planning on spending her time until the afternoon relaxing, but Nina was standing in front of the cafeteria after she finished eating breakfast.

Incidentally, Karian had returned to his room to relax for the entire day today.

"You still haven't even used the kickboard, right? I can't just ignore that."

"That's true, but....."

The strength of Nina's feeling of mission made Felli quite speechless.

"It's better to know how to swim than to not know, right?"

"Even if I can swim, it won't be useful, right?"

"You'll lose out on things."

"For example?"

"For example..... Uh, if the enemy launches an aquatic attack."

What should she say..... Even her reply was very much like her.

".....I'll lose the moment I enter an aquatic battle. Speaking of which, I'll use a Psychokinesis lightning attack before things turn into that, so I won't go in the water myself."

"Ugh..... That's certainly true."

This place was in front of the pool from yesterday. Nina finally started prevaricating during their conversation as they changed cloths. Felli used clever words to whittle away at Nina's 'whatever, let's go!' momentum, managing to reach an outcome favorable to her through rational conversation.

"Right, so I don't think there's any need for me to force myself to learn to swim."

Felli tried to continue her argument along those lines. Come to think of it, swimming classes were optional even for in the Military Arts Department. The reason was because while the world before the autonomous moving cities (Regios) might have had aquatic or underwater battles, now they only fought battles inside the moving cities or in an outer region a short distance away, so aquatic battles were unrealistic. Because of that, swimming was an extremely optional technique, and even Military Artists didn't need to force themselves to learn. That was why the swimming classes in the school had become optional.

At this point, Nina couldn't say anything at all.

Felli thought.

"Oh, Felli-chan? Are you perhaps scared of water?"

She suddenly heard a familiar voice from behind her.

"......Why are you here too?"

She turned around. Sharnid had shown up there.

"That's my line."

Sharnid smiled as he looked at Felli and Nina.

"We're almost in summer, so I just wanted to get used to the water."

After they entered summer, most of the cultivation lakes would be opened for the general public to use, so students who wanted to have fun in the water or play water sports would all gather there.

Sharnid probably planned on doing so too.

"I wish you could show such a diligent attitude during training too."

"No no no, I show it. It’s just that, you know what they say, 'the talented hawk hides its claws'. .....Oh yeah, what's a hawk?"

"It's a bird, you idiot."

"It's rare for people to know what kind of birds there are nowadays."

Felli suddenly thought of something during this conversation, so she looked around.

Sharnid didn't fail to notice that action.

"Unfortunately, Layfon's not here. He's working at a pasture right now."

"No one mentioned him."

"No no no, your eyes were saying it."

.....If she hadn't forgotten to bring her Dite - thinking this, Felli glared fiercely at the smiling Sharnid.

"Well, let's not talk about that..... Felli-chan, do you really not know how to swim?"

"So what?"

"No no no, it's nothing. It's just that, if you can't swim, that means you won't be going to swim when summer comes?"

"I can't expose my skin in that kind of sunlight anyways."

Felli's skin didn't tan, so she would end up very miserable if she did such a thing.

"That's truly unfortunate, there's sunblock that doesn't get washed of nowadays."

"So what?"

Just then, Sharnid's smile became even deeper and he said something to Felli in secret.

"It means that you won't be able to do anything for summer activities, and you might let that girl get several steps ahead."

"..........!"

Felli exerted her rationality to its limits and kept any emotions from her voice. But that shock still flashed through her mind.

That girl..... Sharnid deliberately kept from saying her name, but Felli realized who he was talking about.

She would wear a swimsuit.

Felli couldn't help but imagine. What would that girl wear? A bikini? A one-piece swimsuit? The figure of Nina's friend from yesterday - Selina - appeared in her mind. In terms of physique, that girl was similar to her. In that case, it meant a similar outfit would suit that girl.

How frightening.

Felli glared fiercely at Sharnid. Even if she knew that Sharnid would be no help, Felli still resented his mischievous character for purposefully whispering to her.

".....I don't know what you want to say. I'm just practicing to eliminate the things I'm bad at."

After asserting this, Felli turned to Nina again.

"Okay, let's start practice."

"Huh? Ah, yeah."

Nina's reaction was slow, as she had been excluded from the conversation.

Felli walked to the pool before Nina, completely ignoring this.

"Ah, wait. Warm up first."

Nina followed her, and thus the practice began.

That said, the practice wouldn't become successful all of a sudden.

"Ugh....."

Felli had practiced for an entire four hours. Her body felt shockingly heavy when she got out of the pool.

"It's pretty good that you're able to do this much on the second day."

Nina said.

Despite everything, Felli had succeeded in using a kickboard while breathing, and had swam half the pool length at a time, so it was great progress.

"Good work."

After he walked over to them, Sharnid gave Felli and Nina sports drinks.

"You..... You're still here."

Though talking was bothersome, she felt happy about the drink. Felli gratefully took the sports drink.

"No no no, I happened to be taking a break just now."

Sharnid's body was certainly still dripping wet. Was he swimming in another pool? Felli hadn't been paying attention to that at all while she practiced, so she didn't know what Sharnid had been doing.

But considering the cheers of female students and how Sharnid also replied to them, Felli felt like he wasn't just diligently swimming.

"Hey, do you want to eat something?"

"Uh, well..... I don't have time."

"How about you go to the spa and get a massage? If you keep practicing like this, your muscles will definitely hurt, you know."

"Oh, that's a good idea. The medicinal low-frequency bath here is good at relaxing your muscles."

"Oh, you're a frequent user, huh."

"I use it here when I have the time."

Nina put on a somewhat proud expression, and it was decided that Felli and the others were going to the spa.

The spa was underground.

After taking off her clothes in the changing room and wrapping herself with a towel, Felli walked into the bath. Unlike the humid, warm air of the swimming pool, the air here was hot and full of steam.

"Over here."

After washing herself, she was brought to an area secluded from the other areas by wooden walls.

"Uh....."

This place was filled with a scent other than the aroma produced by steam touching the wood.

"This is....."

There was a narrow tub in the dimly-lit room, and the hot water filling it made Felli's eyes widen.

The rich and peculiar aroma itself was already surprising, and even the hot water was jet-black.

The explanation on the wall read that a mix of several herbs was dissolved in the hot water.

(I see.....)

Felli understood what the 'medicinal' Nina had mentioned meant.

"It also has low-frequency waves going through it, so don't be scared. Careful not to slip."

"Okay."

Nina touched the hot water with her foot first, then submerged herself to her shoulders. After seeing her sigh softly with an expression of comfort, Felli also entered the hot water.

A slippery feeling came to her feet, and Felli knew very clearly that there was some kind of rich substance mixed in here that was not ordinary hot water.

After she submerged her whole body, that slippery feeling made Felli inadvertently shiver. The slow low-frequency waves gently stimulated her whole body.

After coming close to the hot water, the intense scent of herbs rushed into her nostrils.

"It feels weird before you get used to it, so take your time. You can get rid of your fatigue if you soak long enough. It's surprisingly effective."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah....."

Nina closed her eyes with a relaxed expression from next to her. Felli indeed had the feeling that the medicine was slowly seeping into the gaps of her muscles as the low-frequency waves

stimulated her, and it felt a bit comfortable. That said, the scent was still a bit off-putting.

"So this is the secret behind your unnecessary energy."

"What do you mean, unnecessary....."

Nina started to say something, but it quickly turned into a wry smile.

"It's because health is the most important thing. Don't look at me like that, pay attention to managing my health. Since I'm the captain, I can't be taking time off all the time."

"But if the people on top don't take breaks, the people under them can't take breaks either. Please keep it reasonable, Captain."

"You all still take time off however you like, right? Be more diligent."

Those words were true - Felli fell silent.

".....Well, it's finally a holiday, so we don't have to talk about that today."

"Yeah, I think that's fine."

But once they didn't talk about the platoon, their opportunities to talk also vanished. That said, it didn't feel particularly troublesome. Felli didn't hate quiet time, and Nina who came here often didn't have the kind of personality to fear silence.

As a result, no awkward atmosphere formed between the two of them, and they spent the time in silence.

She faced this commotion after changing her clothes in the changing room.

"Then, let's go eat something."

After changing clothes, Felli let Nina walk half a step before her as she thought about how to respond to that. Just then, a chaotic sound came from across the changing room.

It was the sound of glass shattering, and it was very loud.

The uproarious, dangerous sound transformed Nina's expression, and she rushed out of the changing room. Felli also followed behind her.

In front of the changing room was the narrow hallway that divided males from females, and the front desk of the baths were on the other side. Though it was partially automated, there were students and maintenance workers there.

When Felli and the others entered, those female workers had been grabbed by a brawny man.

There were also several other men.

"Hey! What are you doing!?"

Nina roared.

None of them seemed like students of Zuellni. The biggest problem was the restored Dites held in their hands.

"Captain.....!"

Felli immediately judged that roar to be too careless. Nina also quickly noticed that, so her expression twisted. Nina had brought her Dite. But before entering the bath, she had left the Dite at the front desk.

"No one move!"

The man who looked like the leader threatened the students who had heard the commotion.

"You're hostages from now on. We're not going to harm you if you don't act rashly.

His voice was very rational, and just that made Felli feel like this situation would be very troublesome. The opponents wouldn't give them any room to take action.

The intruders made the customers around them move in front of the front desk and surrounded them. Felli and Nina followed their instructions as well.

Felli slowly hid in Nina's shadow as she moved. She rapidly worked her brain. Nina was already being watched. No, Nina would have been watched even if she hadn't spoken up. It looked like these people were Military Artists who had come here via roaming bus, so it shouldn't be difficult for them to recognize Nina as a Military Artist.

In that case, what could Felli do while Nina was being watched? What exactly was going on?

Felli thought about this.

The glass in front of the front desk was shattered. The intruders had broken in from there. This wasn't the first floor, and considering that their Dites had been restored before they broke in, it was probably reasonable to believe that they had probably been in some fight and had then fled here.

Who were they fleeing from?

(It's obvious.)

Felli wanted to relax sometimes too. She had come to this health resort in such an unexpected manner, but this kind of commotion had happened. It made Felli quietly sigh.

As if answering her speculation, an amplified voice reached the room through the broken window.

"You're already surrounded!"

She had heard this voice before, though not enough to get used to it. He was the boss of one of Layfon's workplaces, a higher-up of the city police.

She remembered that his name was Formed.

"We have hostages!"

The man who seemed to be the leader replied loudly.

"We demand a guarantee of safety until the roaming bus arrives ! We'll guarantee the safety of the hostages once we get a clear promise. If not....."

The men looked towards Felli and the other hostages with dangerous lights in their eyes. Frightened voices rose up. There was a violent presence in the eyes of these people backed into a corner.

"Hold on!"

Formed's voice stripped the men of these looks.

Felli had grasped the general situation from the negotiations between Formed and the criminals.

It looked like they were a group of information thieves mainly targeting Zuellni's Aquaculture Department. The person who was chiefly responsible for the theft had already been arrested, and they seemed to be his guards. But it seemed like these men had fled when their crimes had been revealed, and hence they must not have been so unified.

The city police had chased after the fugitives and the situation had turned into this.

They would become sacrifices.

"Zuellni is an Academy City. As long as nothing outrageous happens, we won't forcefully evict you from the city. Your lives are already guaranteed. Doing something like this is equivalent to signing your own death warrant!"

Formed's proclamation seemed to shake the men up quite a bit.

In this enclosed city, criminals had nowhere to go when there were no roaming buses, regardless of how they resisted. Ignoring cities like Joeldem that were hubs of transportation, criminal groups that didn't have personal roaming buses would generally wait for opportunities when roaming buses were coming before taking action. But that had failed, and they could only put up pointless resistance until they were arrested.

Waiting in front of them was the danger of a battle occurring or death by forced eviction.

The criminals only wore such cornered looks because they realized that.

However, thought it was only by a small amount, Formed's statement succeeded in relieving the pressure from them.

(Right now is the time to act, but--)

But if things successfully developed in this direction, they might surrender without her having to act.

Maybe they wouldn't surrender.

She would have to prepare for those circumstances. This wasn't a feeling of responsibility as a Military Artist, nor was it for her own safety..... No, it was for her own safety.

Nina was standing in a place she could protect Felli and her back gave off the feeling that she was desperately trying to conceal her desire to act. Nina would definitely stand up to protect the students here if they gave up on everything. That wasn't because Nina was a Military Artist, it was because of her personality.

(At the least, I should first clearly find out where Captain's Dite is.)

But she would have to use Psychokinesis to do that. Even if she didn't have a Dite to use as an amplification device, Felli could use easily her basic Psychokinesis to locate its position from this kind of distance. But if she were noticed, everything would be over. Felli's Psychokinetic ability had always been extremely outstanding, and if she focused without using a Dite and released her Psychokinesis without properly controlling the output, her hair would react to her Psychokinesis and glow.

(I have to use my Psychokinesis cautiously.)

Felli carefully prepared to release her Psychokinesis.....

"Hey, what are you doing!?"

A man looked over and shouted.

"Huh?"

Coming to her senses, Felli was surprised by her own condition, and Nina also showed a surprised expression as she turned around. Some of her hair that drooped over her shoulder and down her chest also entered her vision.

Her hair was glowing.

She had just planned on using a small amount of Psychokinesis, but her hair was letting off a dazzling light as if she were using her full Psychokinetic power. Felli was rarely like this even in normal battles.

"This....."

But Felli immediately closed her mouth.

She understood.

In that short moment, Felli understood everything about this floor's entire situation, the positions of people, and even the reasons that had made her feel suspicious a few days before.

"Forty degrees to the left!"

She looked at Nina's eyes and shouted.

Nina understood from just that. Felli's eyes couldn't catch the rapid movement of Military Artists, so she used Psychokinesis to track their movements.

Nina moved. The shockwave she released broke apart the desk, and the belongings placed underneath flew out.

Among the things was a Dite. Nina's Dite.

The Dite that flew out along with pieces of the desk was stored in a weapon belt. It hit the wall and bounced back. Nina reached out as it to take it, and the criminals around them swung their weapons to try to stop her.

Something that hampered the criminal's movements happened almost simultaneously with Nina's movement.

"Ah!"

"Uwah!"

There were two screams from the collision. A similar number of bodies falling to the ground also resounded at the same time as the voices.

In the other direction from the changing room - in front of the elevator, Sharnid released his Sakkei, put aside his sniper-type Dite, and closed in while restoring his pistol Dites.

The remaining three were unable to communicate their intents, so they weren't even able to cooperate. They froze there, unable to decide who would deal with what.

Nina had grabbed her Dite in this period of time. She kicked off the wall across from the front desk to change direction, then shouted the restoration keyword and charged at the criminals.

Nina charged at the man resembling the leader, while Sharnid charged at the other two.

"Bastards!"

The man resembling the leader shouted this and swung an axe-type Dite at Nina.

Nina blocked the axe with her left iron whip and pushed it away after landing. She used that force to spin her body, circling behind her opponent's back. As expected of a trained Military Artist, Nina's opponent didn't let her do this. He moved forward with a slightly broken stance, stopping Nina's attack. Nina wasn't able to continue her attack, so she took up a stance again.

Before the dust had time to settle, they charged again.

That was how it appeared.

The man moved, and Nina moved forward as well.

Nina jumped, taking a stance for a reckless strike from above. The man grinned at this completely-unguarded attack as he prepared to counter.

But he was suddenly hit in the back.

"Guah!"

A paralyzing sensation shot through his body at the same time as he felt the impact. It was a paralyzing bullet.

Sharnid was the one who shot the bullet. He had dealt with the two other Military Artists and used a free moment to shoot a bullet into their boss's unguarded back.

But that action also showed a clear opening in Sharnid, who was pressed hard dealing with two people.

But the two of them also fell to the floor because of an impact from behind.

This time Nina was the one to attack. Her move to try a big attack from above had been a feint, and she had used that movement to throw her left and right iron whips.

"Well, that's a victory through trust."

Sharnid grinned after shooting paralyzing bullets into the two fallen on the floor just in case.

"It's something that guys who sell out their companions and run away could never learn."

"Don't make it sound that simple."

Nina regulated her heavy breathing as she picked up her iron whips.

"I was worrying the whole time about whether you'd do what I was thinking. Since you always slack off as soon as we begin training."

"Didn't I say, the talented hawk hides its claws."

"You hide them too much, honestly....."

The men from the city police came to the scene as a peaceful atmosphere formed.

"So, you knew?"

Formed had left after briefly praising Felli's resourcefulness. Afterwards, Felli had asked this of the two of them.

"What do you mean?"

After sighing at the Nina's feigned ignorance, Felli looked behind them.

"Was this planned?"

Karian was there.

"There was no choice. I thought something like this would only when you were a child, but it did all of a sudden."

"Even so....."

And why had Karian claimed that he was fatigued in order to conceal Felli's condition and get her to a health resort?

As Felli felt suspicious, Karian explained:

"Also, if I let you stay that way, you'd continuously infringe on the privacy of others. Do you get it? Over there is apartment-style housing, it's not as large as the house back in our hometown."

"Ugh....."

Felli could only remain silent when he said this.

"Hey hey hey, wasn't that kind of boastful?"

"Shut up."

Nina and Sharnid's quiet words reached her.

She didn't hear them with her ears, but instead sensed them with her Psychokinesis.

She was currently suppressing her Psychokinesis, and her hair wasn't glowing either.

Felli's Psychokinetic ability was far greater than normal Psychokinesists. Though this was the main reason Felli had been

called a Psychokinesis prodigy, it was more accurate to say that was due to the fact that she could control such tremendous Psychokinesis.

But that Psychokinesis hadn't been under complete control when she had been born. Information would always randomly present itself in her mind. Felli had just ignored that information when she was still a toddler who didn't understand things, but that information confused her when she learned more about the world. It surpassed her mental capacity and made her thinking ability decline and become shockingly slow.

The current Felli was only here because she had conquered that.

"It's pretty bad to talk about other people's secrets."

"I couldn't just say nothing."

But it was natural for Felli to constantly release Psychokinesis. It was pretty difficult for Felli to control her Psychokinesis and continuously suppress it from being released.

So before she had come here, her controlling ability would sometimes weaken and her Psychokinesis would constantly flow out. At the time, Felli would hear voices from places she couldn't hear, and see things from places she couldn't see. Sometimes she would even spend the entire day spacing out, unable to muster any energy.

Those situations slowly became infrequent after ten years, and she had already been completely cured before coming to Zuellni. Or at least Felli thought so.

But she didn't think that she would have that condition again now.....

"Coming here was an emergency measure. There are living quarters here and not many people who use them. Well. Although it was just as a precaution, I arranged for no guests to be around your room."

Even so, Felli had still heard Karian and Nina's conversation. Karian had probably explaining the details to Nina at that time.

"Hmm..... Well, it was honestly just a coincidence that I came here. I only tried the swimming practice because the President said that it would be good to tire you out..... Uh, sorry."

Nina lowered her head.

But Felli didn't particularly want Nina to apologize. She knew that she was actually blushing in embarrassment.

She just glared at Karian.

"Don't be that mad."

Felli slowly breathed out. Perhaps wrongfully believing that Felli had rid herself of her anger, Karian approached her.

".....You definitely wouldn't understand."

He definitely wouldn't be able to understand that, to Felli, this kind of embarrassment was like what other people would feel if they were still wetting the bed at this age.

She just silently kicked Karian's shin as hard as she could.

Wear My Rose?

There was a troubled man here.

"Ahh, what am I going to do....."

He looked up as he spoke.

Those words sparkled as they traveled through the air. But sorrow mingled with the light, making their brilliance seem a bit faded.

"What should I do?"

It was a question spoken to none other than himself. But the man couldn't find an answer within his own heart, so all he could do was slowly sink into his own world.

He wrapped his arms around himself, twisting his body in dejection.

The source of the dejection was his own heart, and the source of the problem was the same.

"Ahh....."

But he didn't have to show these feelings. He tightly squeezed his arms, twisted his body, and put a sad expression on his face, turning his constantly-repeated and piled-up questions into words.

"Ahh, where should I direct my love!?"

He expressed that sentence with his whole body.

Specifically, he spread his arms, looked up at the sky, and spun on one foot.

"Don't dance!"

"Ahh, how merciless!"

Vance's curt remark made the man contort his body as he danced in midair.

"Big news!"

Mifi charged into the classroom and grabbed Layfon, her shout reverberating through the whole classroom.

"Mi-chan, I'm listening."

Classes had ended and it was time for a final cleaning right now . Layfon was cleaning the classroom with a broom.

He remembered that Mifi ought to be cleaning the area in front of the school.

It hadn't been too long since he started cleaning the classroom. It wouldn't be strange if they had only started cleaning the area in front of the school right now.

"Right, the cleaning--"

"Right now isn't the time to do that!"

Mifi's eyes glittered. The light in her eyes was a bit different from her level of curiosity. Her current degree of curiosity was the highest.

But actually, that curiosity didn't give any credibility to whatever topic she was bringing.

Naruki and Meishen weren't here. The two of them were cleaning somewhere else.

In other words, there was no one here to control and admonish Mifi.

"So, what is it?"

Layfon asked with a sigh.

"What kind of attitude is that? Are you not interested? I came to tell Layton first because this was big news. You should be thankful to me, super thankful! That'll definitely happen, so please pay first. "

"No, I'm not paying."

"Hmph, you're so reliable in that kind of area. That sucks."

"Uh, what exactly is the matter?"

There were many gazes nearby focused on them, which felt very uncomfortable. The girl who was their class representative was also staring at them. She was Mifi's sworn enemy and Layfon wasn't good at dealing with her, so he wanted to finish this topic and start cleaning again as soon as possible.

"Hey, Mifi-san....."

The class representative strode over.

"Uwah, this is bad."

Mifi also noticed that she was in the classroom, so she instantly pulled Layfon's ear with her fingers.

"Well....."

She told Layfon.

"Well, I'll tell you the rest later!"

Mifi quickly left Layfon's side, running out of the classroom without even listening to the class representative's calls to stop.

"Don't run in the hallways!"

"Sorry~!"

Mifi didn't stop even after being scolded. The class representative shrugged her shoulders huffily and went back to the classroom.

Layfon rubbed the ear that had been pulled as he mulled over Mifi's muttered words.

That was because he wouldn't be able to believe it if he didn't do so.

".....Huh?"

Nina had a lover?

Afterwards, the cleaning was finished.

Layfon and Mifi were in the stairwell on the highest floor. No one was on the roof due to the heat. If no one had business with the roof, no one would come to this stairwell. Though it was very cool in this place where the sunlight didn't reach, no one would gather here after school.

"So, what's going on?"

Layfon and Mifi both held juice bought from vending machines in one hand as they sat here talking, and they were so close that their foreheads were almost touching.

Naruki and Meishen had to work, so they weren't here. Layfon also had to go to the training facility, but if he didn't properly listen to this matter, he wouldn't know what to say when he saw Nina.

"Could it be..... a rumor?"

"How rude, the great Mi-chan witnessed it clearly."

Mifi dexterously stuck out her chest as she whispered, but Layfon still looked at her with dubious eyes, so she took out the evidence.

A photograph.

"This is what I took when we were cleaning just now."

In other words, she had immediately developed this photograph right after escaping the classroom.

So in the end she had skipped cleaning. Choosing to ignore that fact for now, Layfon looked at the photograph.

In the photograph was a guy and a girl walking on the tree-lined road in front of the school.

It was Nina and a man he seemed to have seen somewhere before.

"That's a guy..... Right?"

Layfon asked without any confidence.

The person standing next to Nina was a man whose long golden hair flowed in elegant waves. Did he have makeup on? His face looked strangely beautiful, and his figure was very slender, with

the shirt of his uniform not even regulation. It was made with what looked like a very soft fabric, and ruffled things were sewn into the sleeves. The chest was open wide and red flowers adorned it.

Judging by the open chest, he could be identified as a man.

Layfon realized this, but even through the photograph he realized that this man wasn't masculine.

"What are you saying, isn't that Rafaela Serfa-senpai from the first platoon?"

Mifi said his name matter-of-factly.

"That person is regularly among the top three of the Military Artist Beauty Rankings. He was an overwhelming number one this year. Ah, by the way, Sharnid-senpai was fifth this year, and Layfon was fourth."

"Uh, that doesn't matter at all."

The question of why his name had shown up there truly didn't matter at all right now.

"So, what's he doing?"

"As for that, I have to start investigating right now."

"So they might just be walking together by coincidence?"

If they were walking in front of the first-year school building at this time, their destinations might be the training facility. If the man Rafaela was a platoon member, then there was undoubtedly the possibility that they ran into each other on the way.

"Naive! Layton, your thinking is too naive!"

But Mifi thoroughly struck down Layfon's thinking.

"Layton, you don't realize after seeing this photograph?"

Mifi pushed the photograph over. But Layfon really didn't know the answer. It was Layfon's first time seriously looking at Rafaela's face, so he didn't know what was different about his expression. That said, all he could realize from looking at Nina was that her smile was a bit stiff.

"Captain isn't very good at dealing with this person, right?"

"Wronggg!"

Mifi retorted with a secretive tone.

"That's not where you should be looking. It's here! Here!"

Mifi pointed to the center of the photograph.

The shoulders of the two of them were close.

"......?"

Layfon tilted his head and put on a confused expression, which made Mifi claw at her hair.

"Ahh, why don't you get it. Is it because you're Layton? Or is it because you're a guy? If it's because you're a guy, it'll be hard to fix . That's why everyone forgets there's such a cute girl here[5]!"

Mifi uttered a complaint that Layfon couldn't really understand as she pointed to the same spot.

"It's this, this sense of closeness! Don't you understand? A guy and a girl who just happened to run into each other couldn't possibly walk this close together, right?"

Even if Mifi said this, Layfon still didn't understand. Maybe it was just as Mifi said, since after all Layfon normally didn't concern himself with such things.

But now that she mentioned it, it seemed like the class representative had pulled aw y a bit from him when he had helped her carry things. But maybe that was because she was a girl who preferred that kind of distance, so Layfon still didn't feel like he could conclude anything.

"Anyways, these two are very suspicious! So Layton, what you have to do next is get more definitive evidence. Got it?"

Layfon still felt confused. Mifi shouted this, perhaps feeling impatient about that reaction.

Layfon could only keep nodding his head.

When he arrived at the training facility, Nina was already there.

"You're late!"

The scolded Layfon apologized as he readied his things. Putting aside Naruki for now, Sharnid and Felli were already here. Naruki was at the city police, so of course she wasn't here. Everyone had already arrived other than her.

Hard balls were scattered on the floor. Ever since Layfon had explained the Psyharden training style to Nina, it had been woven into the platoon's basic training regimen.

Layfon restored his Adamantium Dite, then stood on a hard ball . Maybe because everyone was already used to it, their balanced stances on the balls looked quite stable.

"Felli."

After finishing their basic training, Nina spoke to Felli as she was reading a magazine with nothing to do.

"....."

Felli wordlessly grabbed the restored Dite from next to her. The Psychokinesis flakes spread in the training room gave off slight electric glows, then surrounded Layfon and the others in faint light .

Felli had put up one of a Psychokinesist's defenses - a magnetic barrier.

This was an advanced way to train with the hard balls.

Nina, Sharnid, Dalshena, and Layfon released Kei from all over their bodies. Though the power was extremely weak, the balls scattered on the floor bounced away from this. The hard balls trying to fly away were bounced back by the magnetic barrier.

On the other side of the barrier, Felli returned her gaze back to the magazine. A timer next to her was keeping time.

The hard balls hurtled around chaotically. Layfon and the others dodged them or hit them back. It was a foul to use external Kei over the entire body like before. Even if they were to use it, they had to bounce a ball back towards a certain direction.

"Ouch!'

"Tch!"

"Ugh!"

Three of them were unable to avoid or hit back the hard balls. At the same time as everyone was struck by the balls and cried out, Layfon dodged or struck back the approaching hard balls with the

smallest of movements. He might not even have needed to use his limbs. He released external Kei purely through the movements of his muscles to bounce them back.

He watched at Nina as he did this.

She looked no different from usual.

She didn't cower even when the hard balls struck her back from her blind spot, swinging her iron whips to sharpen her nerves. Layfon felt like she could relax her shoulders a bit more. This training was to hone the reflexes and at the same time widen the field of vision. Focusing on a single thing would improve your responses to it. But once something else happened, you would be unable to respond to it so easily and your stance would crumble. In order to guard against that, it was necessary to unconsciously see the entire situation around you and improve the senses. That was the purpose of this training.

As expected, Nina's figure as she focused on this was the normal Nina.

(Lover?)

She really didn't look like she had a lover.

No, Layfon wasn't sure how someone would change by having a lover.

Layfon imagined a blushing, shyly-smiling Nina surrounded by an atmosphere of blooming flowers. It was too unlike her. Layfon shook his head and rejected that image.

As expected, he couldn't see any change.

The timer made an electronic screech to tell them that the designated time had passed. Layfon and the others put away their weapons. This time they grabbed the flying hard balls.

When all the hard balls bouncing around had vanished, the magnetic barrier was released.

"Whew..... How tough....."

Sharnid wiped off the sweat dripping to his chin and then drank a sports drink. Dalshena wiped her sweat with a towel as well.

After using a towel as well, Nina hung it on her neck and then took up a stance with her iron whips. Maybe she was thinking of their training from just now and doing image training.

Layfon was the only one who wasn't sweating. He picked up the hard ball by his feet and put it on the tip of his blade as he looked at Nina.

After they finished three rounds of the same practice along with some other training, it was time to finish up.

As the others slowly warmed down, Layfon was the only one who circulated internal Kei as he walked and reached out a hand to the sports drink placed on the bench.

"What's up with you?"

Felli looked up from her book and asked. She had already stored her crystalline Dite in her weapon belt and looked ready to go home.

"Huh?"

"You seem concerned about something."

"Ah, no, it's nothing....."

"Don't lie."

As Layfon was thinking of an excuse, Sharnid grabbed his shoulder from behind.

"Weren't you looking at Nina the whole time?"

Sharnid, who had lowered his voice, grinned.

"Right, Felli-chan?"

"You smell like sweat."

Felli responded to Sharnid, who had naturally leaned over to her as he spoke.

"Hmph, some girls like that, you know."

"Please exclude me from that group of people."

Sharnid, who was unable to learn his lesson from that cold attitude, obviously didn't move away from her.

"So, what's up? You seem unusually interested in Nina, did something happen?"

"Didn't I say it was nothing?"

"Could it be that you've only now realized your secret, tangled feelings for Nina?"

"What kind of feelings are that.....? Huh? By 'only now', you mean.....?"

Sharnid's words felt strangely unnatural to Layfon.

Why had he said 'only now'?

But before Layfon had an answer to his question, the door was knocked and opened.

"Hi, is training already over?"

The person Layfon saw when he turned around was that man Rafaela Serfa.

Rafaela was dressed like he had been in the photograph, but had a big box in his left hand.

"Rafaela-senpai, why are you here?"

Nina, who was wiping her sweat, approached him with a flustered look.

"Hehehe, isn't it natural for me to want to see the face of my sweetheart as much as possible?"

"Sweetheart....."

Sharnid, whose arm was still hooked around Layfon's shoulder, put on a strange expression as if he had eaten something unfamiliar. Felli was silent. But judging by the way her eyes widened, she was definitely feeling the same as Sharnid.

"Why are you describing me as your sweetheart....."

Nina showed a confused expression, not knowing how to accept being called that.

"Well, we'll talk about that later. I came here for this."

After saying this, Rafaela gave Nina the box in his hands.

"This is.....?'

"It's something I prepared because I thought it would really suit you. Please take it."

Nina still showed a somewhat confused expression after taking the box.

"I'd be really happy if you wore that for me next weekend."

After saying those words, Rafaela turned and left.

All that was left was an atmosphere in which it was hard to speak up.

To put this atmosphere in concrete words, perhaps it would be a giant '?'.

After all of the training was over, Layfon and the others went towards the nearest restaurant.

"So what's going on?"

Dalshena was the first to open the topic.

"Why Rafaela?"

Dalshena was less questioning about the fact that Nina had a lover and more confused about why that person was Rafaela.

"Why that disgusting guy....."

"No, aren't you and Rafaela the same type?"

Sharnid murmured calmly to Dalshena, who was trembling and clenching a fist.

"Oh.....? So you mean to say it would be fine if I were a guy?"

"No..... Well, never mind. Speaking of which, you didn't deny the part about being similar."

"That doesn't matter! Listen, do you know what that guy said to me in a match before? He said 'Hahaha, Dalshena-san. A beautiful rose doesn't rush to bloom.' Hah!"

That had been during a final match of a tournament. It looked like Rafaela had been the one to give Dalshena the final blow when she had fallen into a trap.

"That man's entire reason for existing is to make me mad. And I even lost to him!"

Apparently, she had gotten incredibly angry after the match. Maybe she was angrier about losing to Rafaela than losing the match.

"So what exactly is the current situation?"

Dalshena asked this of Harley, who was the farthest from her. Though Harley hadn't been present at the time, Sharnid had brought him here when he showed up at the training facility afterwards.

"Well, at a time like this you should ask for Nina's expert opinion."

"Why expert....."

Ignoring Harley's confusion, Sharnid explained what had happened in the training facility just now.

Harley's face became paler and paler as he heard the explanation.

"So? Do you think Nina and Rafaela might be lovers?"

"Uh..... Huh? Rafaela-senpai? Why?"

After muttering this, Harley held his head.

"Uwah~ I'm glad I didn't see that. No, maybe I might see it later on? Urgh~ Spare me."

".....I heard that the Captain's family in her hometown was quite a famous clan."

Felli, who had been silent up till now, interjected.

"Ah, yeah. The Antalk family is famous in Schneibel."

"Then I think she'd be familiar with those upper-class customs."

"What does that mean?"

"This box is Binira Barmela."

Those words elicited an 'ah' from Dalshena. Layfon didn't understand what they meant, but Sharnid explained:

"Binira Barmela is a brand of clothing designed mainly for the upper-class. Ahh, come to think of it, Zuellni has some clothing stores that carry their designs."

Perhaps thinking of something, Sharnid looked up at the ceiling .

"It's a bespoke tailoring[6] store, so it's no wonder you didn't know."

"That's since you can't show their design taste with inferior materials, so that way is natural. But even if you have the materials , the technique is still only on the level of students. I wouldn't expect much of those kinds of high-class brands in this kind of place."

After Felli and Dalshena explained this, Layfon shook his head in denial.

"Even if I knew the brand, I definitely would be too scared to buy it."

Layfon only bought clothes at cheap stores, so he would never even think of buy that kind of brand-name clothing.

"......If she's wearing Binira Barmela in Zuellni, it must be 'Night Meeting'. Hey hey, is Rafa-san really going for Nina?"

"'Night Meeting'?"

Another phrase that Layfon didn't know.

"It's a gathering place for rich kids."

"?"

"Famous families or successful business families..... Well, rich people. It's a group that those people formed after coming to Zuellni. But since it's an Academy City, those people were the ones who ended up getting thrown out, so there are a lot of misbehavers."

Dalshena explained.

"Nina would be qualified to join. Speaking of which, our Felli-chan and Shena could join too, right?'

"I'm not interested."

"No way, their bragging makes me want to vomit."

"Meaning you joined?"

"......In my first year."

Dalshena shook her head, unwilling to even recall it.

"Well, since you say that, is Rafaela like that too?"

As expected, Layfon didn't have any interest in high-society things like Binira Barmela or Night Meeting. But he didn't have a very good impression of that person, so maybe Nina was being tricked - that was what Layfon worried about.

"No, Rafaela-san isn't that kind of person."

Sharnid was the first to straightforwardly deny this.

"He's generally a good person..... Although he's a strange person."

Dalshena also added that, wearing a bitter expression.

"You could even say he's the conscious of Night Meeting. He chases people who act too badly out of Night Meeting. If the other party of such a situation is a Military Artist, they might get a painful lesson."

Though she didn't even want to mention his name, Dalshena didn't deny Rafaela's personality.

In that case, he was a good person. Though the phrase 'strange person' made Layfon feel worried.

"But Rafa-san and Nina? Though I thought it was strange that Rafa-san didn't have a lover, I never would have imagined someone like Nina would be his type."

Sharnid's words ended the topic.

Class was ending. The two of them were together like yesterday, having a secret discussion so close that their knees were touching.

"A date at Night Meeting? Huhuhu--"

Mifi mused.

"Hmm, I can't go there. You can't enter if you're not a member, and it seems like their dress requirements are pretty steep. It's really tough for a commoner."

"I see."

After Mifi said this, Layfon let out a relieved breath for some reason.

"Well, I'll think of something."

Break time ended on that note.

During class, Layfon tried thinking about the reason he had felt relieved.

He didn't really understand it himself.

Nina had a lover. Wasn't that good? She would definitely have a love suitable for her age. Even if the other party was that man named Rafaela who wore fluffy clothing and sparkled and who Layfon wasn't used to at all, there shouldn't be any problem as long as Nina like him.

No problem.

"....................?"

There shouldn't be any problem, so why couldn't he accept it?

"Why was that? Why was he in such a troubled mood?"

".....Hmm~?"

Layfon scratched his chest with his finger as if trying to rid himself of that unnatural feeling. Of course, that didn't make the troubled feeling vanish.

After school, Mifi took someone away.

Who was it?

It was Layfon.

"Right!"

Mifi had risen from her desk and shouted this when the last class ended, when it was time to start cleaning. Then she had grabbed Layfon's arm and rushed out of the room.

"Hey! You have to clean!"

The class representative's angry scolding quickly became distant.

"I got it!"

Mifi said after sprinting out of the school building. The two of them had already let go of their hands and stopped running, and were now walking side by side.

Layfon still didn't know their destination.

"What did you get?"

Layfon adjusted the shoes that he hadn't put on properly as he asked.

"Of course, it's a way to sneak into Night Meeting."

"Huh?"

"If we're lucky, we might be able to get free high-class clothing too. Hehehe, I'm looking forward to it~♪"

Mifi led the way with a skip in her step, while Layfon walked behind.

"So what kind of a way is it?"

"Hohoho, just leave it to me."

Mifi wasn't willing to tell Layfon. All she told Layfon - no, all she instructed Layfon to do was to wait until the time came, and nothing more.

He had to make sure to say a certain line if negotiations went smoothly.

Mifi told Layfon this and he agreed to do so. Even so, he didn't really understand what Mifi wanted to do.

But he immediately realized that Mifi was going to make a request of someone.

Because the place they arrived was the Student Council building.

".....I see."

Karian slowly nodded.

The Student Council President has readily agreed to meet. The files on the desk were piled into a mountain, so he was probably very busy. But he seemed to have already dealt with them. The Student Council member who brought them tea took those files away.

"You said you want to experience Night Meeting?"

Karian repeated the first thing Mifi had said, perhaps to confirm her meaning.

Karian's voice wasn't cold, but he didn't show anything that could be taken as agreement. Layfon couldn't read his tone. Ahh, when he started thinking of the entrance ceremony business, his stomach started hurting. He had thought he was already used to the Student Council President.....

"Yeah."

Mifi might be nervous as well, as her voice was a bit cracked.

"But why are you interested in Night Meeting?"

"Because Layton..... Ahem, excuse me. Layfon's quite an excellent Military Artist. Though I wasn't able to see the Military Arts Competition with my own eyes, he shows us incredible matches in competition, right?"

Mifi changed her wording and began an explanation.

"So?"

Karian looked at Mifi with eyes filled with interest. That feeling of interest seemed to say something like 'so, what kind of interesting topic will this girl lay out?'. It felt very similar to the feeling of a carnivore wanting to watch its prey struggle. Of course that wasn't actually the case, but that was the easiest way to imagine it.

Mifi rapidly wove words amidst that tense feeling:

"So Layfon will be accepted by the outside world as an outstanding Military Artist after he graduates. I think it's not a very strange conclusion when you think that way."

"Right, I agree. I think I'd be very happy if he came to my hometown. Of course, as the Student Council President, I must first think of Zuellni's peace, but at the same time I don't want to enchain the students' futures.

What a hypocrite, you even chained me. Had the fact that Layfon had entered the school in General Studies already become

something that had never happened in Karian's mind? Or maybe there weren't even records of it? Layfon shivered as he thought of that.

".....Maybe it's possible that he'll come to my hometown."

Mifi added a bit mischievously, perhaps thinking that she had some leeway.

Karian replied with:

"Hoho, that's hard to say."

"Hohoho, I wonder how it'll turn out."

The two of them traded strange laughs. It felt like a different kind of tension was hanging in the air here.

(What is it.)

Layfon couldn't help but feel like that tense feeling was exploding in sparks above his head.

"Well..... Ah, he's an orphan. I don't want you to misunderstand , I'm not looking down on him for that. That matter is very important for this conversation."

"Why.....?"

"Well..... Because of his circumstances, I believe he was unable to receive a societal status comparable to his strength. Actually, judging by the way he talks and acts, I can't feel the refined air of the Military Artists from famous clans in my hometown."

.....He felt like he was being insulted off-hand.

Also, Layfon didn't really understand what Mifi was talking about. Though the impulse to interrupt swelled up inside him, Layfon still kept quiet and watched what Mifi did next.

".....If he spends his days as a Military Artist in another city after graduating, and if something happens to let him display his power, then his circumstances will improve in a flash. In that case, he'll become a member of high society in that city, and he'll need conduct befitting that position. But he doesn't have an opportunity to learn anything like that. Usually that would be impossible, but it happened to him."

".....I see. I understand what you're trying to say."

Karian slowly nodded.

"Letting him join Night Meeting would be very meaningful in order to let him learn how to interact with high society."

"Right. Also, if Layfon can behave properly in that situation, people will praise Zuellni. At that time, you might be mentioned as one of the people who helped him grow."

Karian nodded, and Mifi nudged Layfon in the side.

He murmured the line they had arranged beforehand.

"Then, please let Mifi be my date."

Then, that day came.

"Heheheheheh~~"

Next to him, Mifi was smiling so much her face was all wrinkled.

She had put on makeup for once, but it was all messed up because she was putting on such a face.

"Come to think of it, props to the President for preparing these clothes all of a sudden."

After saying this, Mifi lifted the hem of her skirt. She felt the comfortable sensation of the fabric on her skin with a rapt expression.

She seemed to be very satisfied with the evening gown that had been prepared for her. Also, the President had made an appointment at a beauty salon where they had done her hair up, and even applied her makeup.

Of course, it wasn't just an evening gown. Shoes, accessories, and a handbag for small objects had also been prepared.

Though she had to return the accessories, it seemed that the shoes, bag, and evening gown had all been given to Mifi. That was probably a reason she was in such high spirits.

"Really? I just feel unnatural wearing this."

Layfon said. Karian had also prepared an entire outfit and shoes for Layfon, and had also scheduled a beauty salon visit for him. These clothes certainly felt nice on the skin, and they weren't actually uncomfortable, but Layfon vaguely felt like it would be very inconvenient for movement.

"I get goosebumps when I think of what I'd do if I got such expensive clothes dirty."

Moving was inconvenient for him because of those thoughts.

The two of them were waiting in the entrance hall of a certain large building. It was a service-oriented place that provided space and food for large parties. An introduction of today's gathering

was by the entrance hall, and the groups of people arriving checked what floor the parties they were attending were and either went there or headed to a cafe to wait for others.

"We really should go wait in the cafe."

Mifi proposed this upon seeing the groups of people passing by in front of them.

"No, it's too expensive."

That was the only thing he wouldn't back down about. The separation between the entrance hall and the cafe was unclear, and maybe that was deliberate. Layfon checked the menu with his Military Artist vision, and after seeing it, he immediately decided never to enter.

"......Stingy."

Mifi pouted, but even so Layfon was resolute in not backing down. Just then, Karian arrived.

"Hi, did I make you wait?"

Karian wore formal attire like Layfon and Mifi, with a female date by his side. She had an intellectual face and felt like someone of the Student Council. The fact that she didn't seem unnatural after changing her outfit meant that her actions were indeed that natural and that she wasn't conscious that she was wearing such high-class clothing.

"Let's go, then."

As Karian urged them, Layfon and the others entered the elevator. After arriving at the top floor, an unexpected face showed up there.

"......What are you all doing?"

"I'd say that's our line."

After walking out of the elevator, Layfon and the others were immediately welcomed by a large, block-clothed man.

It was Vance.

"Are you working? Honestly, is the pension not enough? I thought the Military Arts Head's compensation was pretty good."

"The money is enough. But I have no choice in this."

"Hm..... Well, I see. I know your family's habits....."

"If you know, then hurry up and go. No one will complain about people you're bringing."

Vance remarked after staring at Layfon and Mifi.

"Then I'll do so."

Karian leisurely passed by the Military Arts Head, and Layfon and the others followed behind him and entered the area.

The place was surprisingly cramped.

There were many tables lined up together with food placed on them. There was a band in the corner playing music that wouldn't disturb conversation.

But the center was very spacious.

The tables had been moved to the sides in order to open up the central space, and there were also many booths, which was why it felt unexpectedly cramped. But the booths weren't completely cut off and it was possible to see the faces of the occupants.

"This kind of high-society gathering is held to let people remember the faces of bigshots and also to let those people talk without having to make appointments. That's the focus of this kind of gathering. It's no wonder things look so inadequate, if they're only use a single floor of a building to hold an activity of bigshots."

Karian explained as he brought the two of them to an empty booth. Many people who greeted Karian during the process. Karian politely responded to those greetings, but didn't even stop once.

"Well then--"

Karian said.

"Is that your true goal?"

After saying this, Karian singled out an area with his gaze.

Over there was the entrance through which Layfon and the others had just entered.

A guy and a girl just happened to enter the area.

It was Rafaela. Though his general outfit hadn't changed, the amount of ruffled fabric had increased. The pants he wore weren't the uniform's, so that was the part where it had increased.

Also, standing next to him was Nina - Nina who was walking into the area while paying attention to Vance behind her.

"Ah, how pretty."

Mifi spoke inadvertently.

She wore a white evening gown. It was an outfit with a very refreshing design that bared her collarbones, with a suitable necklace adorning her chest. Her hair had become glossier along with this. Her always somewhat messy hair now smoothly showed the shape of her skull, basking in the light emitted from the chandelier.

Nina also had makeup on. Her lips were painted a pale pink, and the color on her eyelids made the contours of her eyes more apparent. It seemed that her eyelashes had been done as well, as they were clearly visible even though they were usually unnoticeable.

"Ohh? As expected of a daughter of the Antalk family."

Karian also made an admiring sound.

"The Antalk family is one of the few prestigious families of Schneibel, so she must be very used to these occasions, right?"

".....Huh? Ah, yeah."

Karian's words made Layfon finally come to his senses.

"Then the problem is her date, right?"

"Yeah....."

Unable to continue the sham, Layfon nodded honestly.

"Rafaela-san..... Although the fact that Nina-san chose him as a lover is interesting, I don't understand why Rafaela-san chose her as a lover."

"What does that mean?'

"Well, let's watch the situation for now. That's why you two came here, right?"

Layfon fell silent when this was brought up. He could only stay silent.

Though Nina was a bit confused when Rafaela led her inside, she still greeted those who approached her with a dignified attitude.

Layfon couldn't do something like that at all. He would definitely feel confused right away and then look for a place that

was out of the way. But Nina stood next to Rafaela, participating in chats without even running away.

This was the method of interaction in high society, Felli had said. Could Nina, Dalshena, and Felli all do this naturally? Though Sharnid didn't often talk about his background, he was probably good at doing this kind of thing too. Even Naruki could definitely do it.

Was Layfon the only one who couldn't?

After thinking this, Layfon felt like a gust was blowing in his chest. He wasn't dissatisfied with his background as an orphan, since he was unable to imagine what the normal households other people talked about were like.

But, if..... If Layfon Alseif had grown up in a normal household, would he be able to naturally do something like this? Maybe he would be being honored as a Heaven's Blade successor in the Grendan Royal Palace or some other location, mingling with even more dignity than now or saying a witty joke to make everyone laugh.

(.....I can't imagine it.)

Layfon felt stunned at his poor imagination as he continued observing. No, thinking carefully, he felt like no Heaven's Blade successor could do such a thing. Maybe Troyatte could, and maybe Savaris could, and Kanaris, and Tigris might be able to. What about Ruimei? As for Lintence, Layfon couldn't even imagine such a scene.

Ahh, Reverse definitely couldn't do something like this.

Nina and Rafaela left their conversation circle and entered a booth like Layfon and the others. Even if there was a wall, he could still see their faces.

"But it was honestly a surprise. I never thought the Captain would be able to change like that."

"Women have many faces. Guys are so shallow compared to them."

"Uu..... Meaning that it's still early for me?"

"It's not a big deal, women naturally become like that with experience."

".....Will guys be crowding around me too?"

"You're a very charming woman already, you know."

"Ahahahaha..... President, your date looks really scary."

"Yeah, my side feels very painful right now."

Sweat beaded on Karian's forehead, the woman showed a cold glare, and Mifi broke out in a cold sweat..... Next to that scene, Layfon quietly looked at Nina.

He had confirmed it.

He had succeeded in achieving his aim, to sneak into Night Meeting and see Nina.

She was currently in a relationship with the man Rafaela.

That was how things were - Layfon thought.

In that case, this matter was already over. He would just have to beg Mifi not to write an article on it later. It would bother Nina if the situation became too noisy. I was fine as long as Nina was happy - Layfon thought.

But what was wrong?

The gust he felt in his chest seemed to be even colder than before. What was wrong, what was wrong - Layfon kept thinking. Those feelings might be very similar to what he had felt when Nina had suddenly vanished, or maybe they were different. Maybe they were similar, but completely different feelings.

Because Nina was right before him. She had been very normal in the training facility, no different from always. So nothing should have changed to Layfon. Perhaps that would be the case in the future as well. Nina was there, just like always, in front of Layfon.

But why was he so.....?

Time passed, but the traces of that strange feeling didn't disappear.

The band changed songs.

They changed from a song that wouldn't disturb conversation to a lively, fast-paced song.

Once the song changed, the movements of the people present also changed. The men took the hands of their dates and gathered in the open central area.

A dance began.

The intense movements of the dance made those who didn't join in the dance laugh. The band's playing became even fiercer. As if the dance were being manipulate by the fast rhythm, pairs started to fail. The laughs became even more intense, between both the surrounding people and the ones dancing. The pairs who fell also laughed.

Nina also smiled among the group dancing.

"Tonight's Night Meeting is quite good. This place was a dismaying gathering when I was new here."

"It's because the Military Arts Head is here."

The woman by Karian replied to his impression.

"No, that's not it. I heard that Rafaela-san is the current core of Night Meeting, so he must have succeeded in cleaning up Night Meeting. Though he likes dressing gorgeously, he's a diligent, good man deep inside."

Right. Though his appearance was eye-catching, no one said anything bad about Rafaela as a person. Judging by the way he addressed him, Sharnid seemed close to him. Though Dalshena hated him, she hadn't said anything bad about him.

That meant Rafaela was a good person. Since he was a member of the first platoon, he had a reliable strength completely opposite from his appearance. Once he thought of the Heaven's Blade successors, he realized how foolish he was for being confused by appearances. Reverse had an iron will underneath his weak appearance, and normal people definitely wouldn't imagine what kind of power was hidden under Barmelin's strange dress.

Rafaela was in no way unsuited to be Nina's lover.

That was how things were.

The music changed. This time was a gentle, atmospheric song. The lights dimmed to match the music, and the dance steps also changed. The men held the waists of their dates, and the atmosphere became more intimate.

"Well, it would be a waste if we just stayed here the whole time.
"

"Ah, President."

Karian pulled his date away.

The two who were left here looked at each other.

"......What do we do?"

"What do you want to do?"

Layfon put on a confused expression when Mifi asked this. Neither of them had any confidence about dancing. Also, dancing with Mifi in this kind of atmosphere would seem like a joke to others.

"Layton, do you want to..... Eh, no way."

Mifi murmured, seeming to think the same.

"Should we go back?"

"I guess. Anyways, there's nothing left to investigate, and I don't want to take an exclusive scoop of your captain. Also, I don't have a camera."

The President had indicated in his agreement that she couldn't bring a camera in if she wanted to come here. Mifi nodded with a calm expression.

The two of them quietly stood up from their seats. Mifi had her hair down and was wearing makeup, so she gave off a different atmosphere from usual and wouldn't immediately be spotted by Nina. But Layfon used Sakkei was he walked out in order to keep Nina from noticing him.

After seeing Vance standing by the entrance with nothing to do, Layfon naturally turned around.

In that moment.

There was Nina's surprised face.

Rafaela firmly held her waist in his hands.

Nina was swaying back and forth, her fingers on his chest.

Nina's eyes wide as she briefly muttered something, and Rafaela's face next to hers.

Layfon turned around in that moment.

He clenched his fist.

Layfon himself didn't really understand why he had clenched his fist. All he felt was an 'ah.....' sensation and nothing more. He didn’t really understand anything else about his emotions. But it seemed like there were compelling emotions in that brief word, so Layfon didn't open his clenched fist.

Bang!

A first was swung. It sank into Rafaela's cheek, making him lean backwards and away from Nina.

But Layfon wasn't the one who swung the first.

Layfon gazed at the scene in surprise.

He didn't move half a step.

Nina was the one who swung her first.

Laughs came from around them.

"I didn't allow you to go that far."

Nina's calm voice made the laughs become even louder.

"Ugh..... Sorry. But tonight was enjoyable, so thank you."

"My pleasure."

He had been hit, but Rafaela thanked her. Nina also responded. The surrounding laughs became cheers.

".....But, but! Everyone!"

Rafaela suddenly spread his arm, raising his voice towards everyone present.

"I've found true love this time. No, everyone! All of you wise ones must have already noticed! I hate pretending to fool others."

Rafaela started a speech.

He moved with an exaggerated posture that couldn't even be called dancing as he wove his words:

"Military Artist families are about lineage. Maintaining that lineage is the basic duty of one from a Military Artist family. But everyone! Love is not necessarily a friend of that idea. Just like my father, and just like my mother. Everyone is aware of this. There are also those who are troubled because lineage and love are gears that do not mesh for them.

I am the same!

Everyone!

Today, I have decided! Goodbye, duty! I will be reborn for love!
"

Cheers came from the surroundings again.

In that moment, something seemed to make Layfon realize the goal of Rafaela's sudden declaration.

Rafaela's gaze pointed at Layfon..... It wasn't just his gaze, even his body flew by his head as he ran towards Vance standing blankly by the exit.

"Vance, as I thought, I only have you!"

"Shut up!"

Vance struck Rafaela with a karate chop as he was about to hug him.

That movement didn't have the mercy that Nina had shown.

"......Layfon?"

Then, Nina noticed Layfon.

"I heard that the families of those two have a master-servant relationship."

Nina explained on the way back.

"Though I'm not really sure, I heard that Rafaela-senpai's family was the master and Vance-senpai's family was the servant. The relationship between the two of them is just the opposite in the first platoon, so it must be a custom of their city unrelated to power or anything."

"Oh....."

The two of them walked to the tram stop.

"......Though I personally don't understand at all, Rafaela-senpai seems to be only interested in men. No, that's certain."

Nina seemed to take issue with that.

"You saw it too, right? Rafaela-senpai likes Vance."

Afterwards, Rafaela hadn't given up on hugging Vance even after being struck, and the Night Meeting participants had laughed while watching the confusing scene of the two of them all tangled up.

It seemed that was a common occurrence.

Meaning that Rafaela had long since expressed those feelings to Vance.

"In that case, why were you with him, Captain?"

"Uh..... Well."

Unexpectedly, Nina put on a serious face.

"Well, despite what he felt, some thought things wouldn't work out. I heard that he explained this to someone he knew, and then spent some time with her in Night Meeting and practiced liking women. But that woman had a lover, so he couldn't ask her out, which is why he suddenly spoke to me about it. At the start I was planning on refusing him, but he was so serious that I wanted to help him, so I said I'd only help him out this time."

"I see....."

Layfon understood.

Layfon felt like this was very must like Nina's style.

Unable to ignore someone who was trying their best.

It was honestly very much like Nina, wasn't it?

"Right, Layfon, why were you in that kind of place?"

"Huh? Ah, well....."

In order to confirm whether Nina truly had a lover - Of course Layfon couldn't say something like that.

"Well, it was to study high society."

Layfon immediately mentioned the excuse Mifi had used with the President.

"Study society? Well, Night Meeting is pretty nice, though it's not in Schneibel's style. I'm not confident about whether I behaved right or not....."

However, Nina accepted that reason.

"But dancing is the same no matter where you are. Layfon, can you dance?"

"Huh? No."

"I see. I'll teach you, then."

"Ah, uh, there's no need."

"Don't be polite, it's all about the rhythm."

Nina grabbed Layfon's hand right there after she said this.

The two of them danced under the streetlight in front of the empty stop.

Though it was only for a brief time until a tram came, it was enough to melt the frozen emotions in Layfon's heart.

Persons

Mifi Rotten.

She boldly stepped into the outer area.

It was an action that was kind like a ritual for her when she came to a new city.

"Ah, hmm."

Mifi had murmured this when she got off the roaming bus and felt the wind blowing over her. Her hair, which had grown because she was too lazy to cut it, was still tied in twin tails like before.

Now that the cities didn't move, the roaming buses that had once chased after the autonomous moving cities (Regios) roaming over the land had become scheduled transportation that went between cities.

Even so, they still hadn't abandoned their name of 'roaming buses'. It was because everyone was used to that name.

Maybe the name would change in ten or twenty years. If someone thought of an appropriate enough name before then, the name might even be replaced right away.

Mifi knew that it was common sense.

They had moved from an era where the cities moved around to one where the cities didn't move. Mifi knew what she did because she had lived through such a period of time.

"So this is Grendan, huh. It's my first time coming here, even though it's nearby."

The people getting off the bus jostled Mifi as she looked around the scenery of the road.

This was the city where the strongest Military Artists gathered, a city that had continuously fought with filth monsters, as well as the city that had fought with a certain being that fell from the sky and had become the site of the final battle. Mifi had naturally imagined that this place would have a pointed atmosphere full of killing intent.

But that atmosphere was nowhere. Though Mifi was only walking from the outer area to the city along this road, she already noticed that she would have to fix her inflexible impression.

Houses, restaurants, and billboards for consumer stores densely lined the road to the city.

It had become possible to watch buildings spreading away from the city center in cities other from this one after the cities stopped moving, but Grendan's style of expansion was unique and of a level that couldn't be seen anywhere else.

This place was rapidly responding to the changing times.

It was because Mifi had naturally imagined this place with the atmosphere of a stubborn, traditional old man that she was surprised at this kind of adaptability.

But upon thinking carefully, maybe that wasn't strange.

"Well, after all, it's Layfon's and Clara's hometown."

That impression of hers seemed very strange when she considered those two.

She had probably prepared her mind too much - Mifi secretly scolded herself.

"First is to gather information, but....."

Mifi held up the tourist map she had gotten on the way as she sank into thought.

Though she had rushed here after hearing the rumors, what should she do to confirm the truth?

"I can't just run on in."

Mifi spoke as she continued walking.

She had already folded up the tourist map and stuffed it in her pocket.

During her walk, she noticed map terminals for travelers to use, so she took a more detailed look there and found her destination.

Actually, Mifi already had someone to get information from.

"That's how things are, so here I am."

"Oh."

Mifi had suddenly showed up with a smile, but the other person reacted a bit dully.

"Uh, Mi-chan?"

"Yes yes, it's been a while."

Mifi had come to an institution called the Psyharden Orphanage , and in front of her was Leerin.

"It's been... a while."

"Did you forget about me?"

Leerin's stiff reaction made Mifi feel a bit anxious.

"You're Mifi from Zuellni. I remember."

After saying this, Leerin's stiffness finally let up a bit.

"But I was only there for a short year, and--"

"Yeah, it's already been a long time."

Mifi nodded, noticing what Leerin wanted to say.

In other words, Leerin wanted to say that it had already been too long.

It had already been three years since Mifi graduated from Zuellni. And when you added her time in school.....

"It has been a long time."

"Yeah."

There was no helping it if Leerin didn't remember Mifi's face.

After all, Leerin looked a bit different from what Mifi remembered. The Leerin she knew was a mature girl who gave off a somewhat calming atmosphere, but now she felt much more depth from that calm attitude.

"Sorry, sorry."

Mifi smiled leisurely.

"Well, I have something to ask of you."

"Huh?"

"Actually....."

Mifi prepared to say her request right away, but right then.

"Leerin-san!"

A somewhat-unreliable voice approached them.

"What is it, Myunfa-sensei?"

A bespectacled woman who looked somewhat unreliable just like her voice did showed up. Her age was probably about the same as Mifi's.

Though that woman gave off an unreliable atmosphere, her movements were very precise. Maybe she was a Military Artist - Mifi thought.

"Um..... Shefa..."

"What about Shefa?"

"He said he wanted to fight with Shasheila. Um, in the Luckens dojo."

"What?"

Leerin frowned at Myunfa's words.

"How did things end up that way?"

"Uh, I don't understand the situation either."

Mifi looked at the teary-eyed Myunfa and the flustered Leerin as she thought 'no, she can't be a Military Artist, right', continuing to observe the glasses-wearing woman.

But she wouldn't be able to bring up her topic if this went on.

"Uh, who are Shefa and Shasheila? Also, is Luckens the same as Gorneo-senpai's family?"

"Uh, who's this?"

Myunfa gave her a surprised look.

"Hm~~"

Leerin put a finger on her forehead and thought.

It looked like some troublesome problem had happened, but Mifi obviously wouldn't back down so easily.

"Ah, nice to meet you. I'm Mifi Rotten. I'm from here."

She gave her business card after saying this.

"Ah, okay."

Myunfa, who wasn't used to things like business cards, looked at the name and the name of the magazine written on the card with a clearly confused appearance and tilted her head.

"What's 'World Times'?"

"It's the name of the magazine that I'm an editor for."

"Huh? O.....Okay."

"It's alright, our magazine will be published here soon."

Mifi smiled at the confused Myunfa.

"After all, we're aiming to be the first large-scale informational magazine in the world!"

Though her true goal was important, she couldn't forget about the matters right before her.

Mifi secretly decided to persist until the very end.

Gorneo Luckens.

He had rarely felt relaxed through his entire life.

The seed of his headaches was always near him and never disappeared. Once he resolved one, another would show up, often coming with one or two more.

That 'seed of his headaches' would germinate and proliferate even if he didn't plant and water it.

What a bothersome thing.

"What is it?"

The noise from outside made Gorneo return to the present.

Morning training had ended and it was now break time.

"Ah, Acting[7] Master."

There were several Military Artists staying behind in the vast dojo to carry out individual training. They also looked through the windows at the commotion outside.

"Uh, the girl--"

Gorneo vaguely knew what was happening just by hearing those words.

Shrill childish voices he had grown accustomed to overlapped and reached his ears from the courtyard.

"Shefa came?"

"Seems so."

Gorneo pressed on his temple at the disciple's words.

Gorneo's daughter, Shasheila, got along very poorly with her childhood friend Shefa.

They got along so poorly that people wondered why they were still called childhood friends.

And they would fight all the time.

"Honestly, what are they fighting about at age five."

Gorneo groaned quietly as he moved to the courtyard.

Even Military Artist children should be able to smile and watch from the sidelines at age five. Even Military Artist children were very limited in what they could do at age five.

But unfortunately, these two weren't ordinary children.

Gorneo complained as he ran to the courtyard.

"We'll decide victory today for sure!"

"Decide victory!"

What did they mean, 'decide victory' - though he couldn't help but think that, commenting on everything a five-year-old child did wouldn't help with anything.

"Cut it out!"

Gorneo shouted as loud as he could, and the Kei-infused war cry resounded through the courtyard.

But unfortunately, his intimidation had succeeded in knocking out the disciples who were watching the situation in the dojo behind him, but didn't work at all on the children and the others who should have taken the entire sound head-on.

The two children stood face-to-face.

One was a red-haired girl who looked very fierce. Her hair was very curly, and stuck out here and there even when it was tied up behind her head.

She was Shasheila Luckens, Gorneo's daughter.

The other person was the complete opposite, a boy with straight , black hair.

His name was Shefa Almonise.

That's right, he was the son of the Queen of Grendan - Alsheyra Almonise.

What was the prince of the Almonise family of the Three Royal Families doing?

"Oh, Goru. What are you doing?"

"Ah, Gorneo. Hi."

The kids ignored Gorneo and glared at each other, but two other people looked over at him.

These two were very annoying.

"Why didn't you stop them?"

Gorneo asked the woman closer to him with a reproachful tone.

Though he was ninety-nine percent sure this was a futile effort, it was unfortunate that his personality made him ask this.

"Why? The two of them seem like they're having fun."

The woman, who had red hair just like Shasheila, said with a calm attitude.

"That's not the problem."

Though it was just like he imagined, this answer that didn't resolve anything at all felt very bothersome to Gorneo.

Her name was Shante Luckens. In the past, her name had been Shante Leite and she had been in the Academy City Zuellni together with Gorneo. Now she was Gorneo's wife and Shasheila's mother.

And the other person.

She was also a mother.

Of course the two of them were both mothers.

Gorneo didn't think that Shefa's father had any common sense, but he was certain that he wasn't the kind of person to excitedly join in on this kind of fight.

Right, so based on personality, the person there definitely had to be the mother.

That ought to be correct, but--

"Why did you turn young!?"

In any case, Gorneo wouldn't be satisfied unless he said this, so that's what he shouted.

Over there was Shefa's mother, Alsheyra. That was completely correct.

But her appearance definitely couldn't be called that of a mother .

She was definitely two heads shorter than she was the last time he had seen her, and her shoulders had shrunk according to the same ratio. Even her expression held a youth to match her physique.

In terms of her appearance, she had returned to that of a ten-year old.

"Hehehehe, I surprised you, didn't I, Gorneo."

The little Alsheyra put her hands on her hips and stuck out her chest next to Shefa.

"Though I can stop my body from aging, it's impossible to reverse aging no matter how much Kei power you have. That's been a foregone conclusion among Military Artists for a long time. "

Though it had become a foregone conclusion, no one among the Heaven's Blade successors could even maintain their youth like the Queen.

"I was always thinking about where the problem was. Even if the muscles have already grown, you should just need to tighten the skin. If you do that, your muscles naturally return to a suitable

size after a while. That's right, the problem is with the bones. The bones are the only thing you can't shrink. But I finally solved that puzzle."

Alsheyra said this with a pained expression, perhaps thinking that she had become a scholar.

"Bone density is the key to solving the puzzle!"

Alsheyra made a fist as she said this, her face filling with light.

"Your bones will fracture if you just rapidly increase the pressure over your entire body. If you don't do that, and instead take your time to gently pressurize them, you can push the surface bones inside bit by bit. With those methods, you can shrink your body without harming your bones!"

Gorneo didn't understand what she was saying at all.

"Oh, I see."

"You get it!?"

Gorneo looked at Shante with a stunned expression, who was wearing an expression of admiration.

"Hey, you're too loud!"

Shasheila shouted angrily at the adults who had ignored the children and begun becoming noisy themselves.

"This is my and Shasheila's fight, so watch quietly."

Shefa also looked worriedly at Alsheyra.

"What? You were getting dominated before."

"Sh.....Shut up!"

"And Shasheila even ended up protecting you!"

"I said shut up!"

Gorneo felt sympathy for the red-faced, shouting Shefa.

"Anyway, I said not to fight!"

Though he felt sympathetic, it was an unrelated matter.

"That's not something kids should do!"

"Even if I'm a kid, there are things I can't back down from!"

Shefa retorted to Gorneo's anger.

"Right, right!"

The two of them would only get along at this sort of time.

"Today we're definitely going to decide victory!"

"Decide victory!'

The two of them released Kei as they shouted.

In that moment, Gorneo lowered his center of gravity and prepared to meet the incoming shockwaves.

The air pushed strongly against him and his face was assaulted by a pain as if it were being struck.

The two kids had unleashed Kei.

Just that much had led to a phenomenon of this level.

They couldn't be spoken of as mere five-year-old kids.

These five-year-old children were already displaying incredibly abnormal Military Artist talent.

"Honestly!"

The birth of this child was a joyous thing for the Luckens family - perhaps it made up for his brother's failures - but Gorneo himself just wondered why things had turned out this way.

"Why do I have to get played around with like this!?"

He was always being toyed with by others, so much that he even felt hate for it.

"Ahh, it's always like this! My whole life has been like this!"

"Goru, calm down."

Shante consoled the dismayed Gorneo.

Now that things had turned out like this, Gorneo could no longer stop it.

After all, he was unable to approach due to the Kei pressure.

"Come on, we'll see who's the best today!'

"Yeah!"

Shasheila nodded after Shefa said this.

"Today for sure....."

"I'll show you whose mom Leerin-sensei is!"

The two of them shouted this in unison and collided with one another.

The shockwave produced was completely incomparable to the one before, and Gorneo was blown away.

"Uh, your moms are right there!"

"Y.....Yeah. Shasheila, I'm your mother!"

Their wails reached his ears as he was being blown away.

".....You get what you deserve."

Gorneo's mood improved somewhat.

Alsheyra Almonise.

The fact that she was her mother had been denied completely.

"Why!?"

Her question became a wail, but no retort or answer came. Her son was fighting, and Shasheila's mother was also frozen in the same state. That guy who pretended to be a normal person had been blown away.

"Why, why? Is it because I became so young? Meaning that being young is a sin? Is the problem that I'm beautiful and strong and the queen and perfect? Is it hard to feel close to me? To think even my son would think that! Ahh, my existence itself is a crime."

"How's that possible."

A retort came from behind her.

"What are you doing? Honestly, you're the same as before."

It was Leerin.

"What do you mean, 'same as before'."

"You're the same as before. Stop it, you two!"

Leerin's voice got through the explosive sounds of fighting booming around them.

Stop.

The children, who hadn't even listened to a certain large man when he bellowed this, stopped instantly.

"Sensei!"

"Sensei, don't stop us!"

"I'm stopping you! Actually, what are you even doing?"

"We're already fed up with our moms."

"Yeah, yeah."

The children's' words froze the two mothers.

"What's wrong with them?"

Leerin asked.

Those words were generally thoughtful.

"Because Mom can't cook."

"When I ask for sweets she tells me to steal from the orchard."

"She get in loud arguments at night."

"She stole the fruit I brought back."

"When she really likes a food she always makes me eat the same thing."

"She broke my toys."

"She can't sew either."

"She got me kicked out of kindergarten when she made a fuss at the parent conference."

"Me too."

The children listed their points of dissatisfaction one by one, making Leerin's expression colder and colder.

Shefa and Shasheila had only recently entered the Psyharden Orphanage that Leerin managed.

Their mothers' reasons were that the children had extraordinary talent, so a normal kindergarten would be unable to foster them. Myunfa was a rare individual who was a Military Artist and had preschool teaching qualifications, so they had wanted to entrust their children to her no matter what - supposedly.

Leerin had also felt split when she heard those requests. The children gave off a very crude impression, and they might have led to problems in Leerin's orphanage institution.

The days when she could meet Alsheyra so casually were no longer a reality, so Leerin hadn't seen Shefa either. That had been the same for Shasheila.

So she had been a bit worried.

But she quickly realized that those worries were unfounded.

Shefa and Shasheila were both very obedient children. They would pick up on things right away, and quickly got along with the children of the orphanage.

Leerin had even wondered what exactly the problem with them was.

Meaning that the problem was with their mothers.

"Ignoring the first half for now, I can't ignore the last part."

Leerin glared fiercely at the two of them.

"Hahahahaha....."

Alsheyra could only laugh dryly.

"Well, this is okay though."

"I only met Leerin-sensei because I got kicked out."

"And I made lots of friends."

"But there's only one open bed right now."

"So only one person can become a family member."

Alsheyra instantly paled the moment she heard this.

"Ah, not good."

She spoke unconsciously.

Though they hadn't met in a long time, she didn’t think her intuition about Leerin was wrong.

Myunfa's face became pale behind Leerin as if to back up Alsheyra's feeling.

If she, who was always with Leerin, was also reacting like this, it meant that Alsheyra's feeling was correct.

So she had better run.

She thought this to herself.

But she was grabbed firmly.

"Where are you running?"

"Ah, huh?"

Her arm had been grabbed and hence she couldn't move. Alsheyra felt helpless.

"Leerin, if I remember right, didn't you turn back into an ordinary person?"

Airen had revived in that battle back then, and Leerin had lost Airen's factor from inside her body at the same time. She had returned to an ordinary person, and thus her decision to abandon her right to succeed the throne had obtained approval.

Even if their mission had already ended, the pursuit of strength that was so valued among the Grendan royal family wouldn't vanish so easily.

So Leerin's decision to abandon her right to succeed the throne had passed very easily.

Could it be that Leerin had tricked everyone?

"Yeah, I turned back into an ordinary person."

"Huh? What's that mean? I thought I was supposed to be the strongest in Grendan, right?"

"Of course, the fact that Your Majesty is the strongest hasn't changed.

"Uh, then what's this?"

"Your Majesty, didn't you know?"

"Kn.....Know what?"

"What happened to Airen-sama and Saya after that battle?"

"They..... disappeared.

Right, Airen and Saya had fought in that battle and disappeared . According to what Nina, who had been in the center of that battle , had said, the two of them been swallowed up by Dixerio's flame and had vanished.

But Saya had created this world, and it still went on. Her death ought to be equivalent to this world's death, and since that hadn't happened, it meant she hadn't died.

That part brought Alsheyra relief, so she hadn't sent anyone to find their whereabouts. After all, Grendan had been incredibly busy after the battle, and they couldn't even decide where they ought to look.

"It's very troublesome, but they were hurt in that battle and are recovering right now. The hiding place they chose is--"

"No way."

"Yeah."

The moment she nodded, in that very instant, her left eye changed. It became a strange eye with a ring of thorns in it.

"This time it's the factors of both of them, which is honestly very troublesome."

"In other words, you're the one maintaining the world right now, Leerin?"

"Maybe so."

Alsheyra could only feel terrified at that smiling face.

Incidentally, this conversation was spoken in a volume that only the two of them could hear. The fact that they she could do such a thing directly proved that Leerin wasn't an ordinary person.

"Then....."

Creak.....

The hand that Leerin grabbed Alsheyra with increased its strength.

"Uh, that really hurts."

"Of course. It's to keep you from running away, right? Since I'm going to lecture all four of you at the same time."

"Noo~ooo~ooo~"

Alsheyra's resistance was ignored magnificently. The children's' expressions also changed when they noticed the change in Leerin's atmosphere.

"I won't forgive you if you run away."

With those words, the children froze where they were and didn't move.

Afterwards, Shefa and Shasheila were scolded for scorning their mothers and for their misunderstandings of the orphanage.

Of course, their mothers were also admonished as those responsible for overseeing them.

Leerin would also correct her operating procedure and fix what the children thought about the orphanage.

"What a capable caretaker."

"Yeah, I look up to her a lot."

Myunfa expressed her agreement.

"But come to think of it, you really have no presence."

"Uuu."

Alsheyra's retort made Myunfa cringe. But even so, she was the fiancee of the Heaven's Blade successor Haia. The world was really hard to understand.

Come to think of it, she seemed to remember that Haia had become the head of the Psyharden style.

"Um....."

Someone with even less presence than Myunfa spoke up as the local situation was being neatly resolved.

"Hey, who are you?"

"Ah, she was Layfon's classmate."

"Ahh, from Zuellni?"

"Yes. It's good to meet you, Your Majesty, I'm Mifi Rotten."

After saying this, Mifi gave Alsheyra a business card. It was plain to see that this woman had guts.

"Actually, I came to ask Leerin to get you to accept an interview. If it's convenient, could I interview you directly?"

"Huh? What do you want to ask?"

"Well....."

Just then.....

A sound split the air.

"A gunshot?"

Mifi tilted her head.

Her figure seemed to be tilting.

"Huh?"

As Alsheyra said this, she collapsed.

A red stain spread on her chest.

Sharnid Elipton.

Why had things turned out this way?

After shaking the sensation of the trigger off of his finger, Sharnid clicked his tongue as he left the area. He had finished his mission, and all that was left was to escape.

Sharnid Elipton ran on the rooftops. He down the Dite he had used, but placed the Dite he preferred to use back in his weapon belt.

"Honestly."

He suppressed his voice to the smallest range and erased his presence with Sakkei. Sharnid ran across the skyline of Grendan, sprinting over rooftops.

Sharnid had come to Grendan seven days ago.

Someone had called him over.

No, come to think of it, the job hadn't been entrusted to Sharnid.

It had been forced onto him by Sharnid's father.

"Stupid old man."

That was why Sharnid was complaining nonstop.

"He definitely ran away because he was afraid of trouble. I want to run away too."

Sharnid closed his complaining mouth.

Killing intent exploded out from behind him.

Someone had understood the situation and gotten angry.

There was no longer any time to complain anymore. Sharnid sharpened his mind and maintained his Sakkei.

The distance instantly shortened. But the opponent didn't spot him.

He would be dead if he got noticed. His skin felt numb just from the powerful, overwhelming Kei. Sharnid could only suppress his breathing.

Next to him was a child, a boy.

Sharnid had secretly heard their conversation before, so he knew that this boy was called Shefa.

To think such familiar faces had gathered here - he felt stunned.

There was no helping the people who were supposed to be there, but there was even an ordinary person among the people who weren't supposed to be there.

What was going on?

A child who was only several years of age gave Sharnid a tense feeling as if he had been forced to swallow a stone.

Sharnid quietly moved as he endured that unreasonable feeling.

"Where are you!?"

The crying, shouting boy made his guilt well up.

Just that made Sharnid feel like he had been entrusted with a worthless job.

But even if it were a worthless job, he had reasons why he couldn't ignore it.

"Where are you!?"

Sharnid endured his guilt as he fled the scene.

Where would the fleeing Sharnid go?

Sharnid quietly slipped into a residence that looked particularly high-class. He wasn't spotted by any of the maids walking here and there as he snuck into his employer's room.

"Ah, good work."

It was another familiar face that came out to greet him.

Claribel.

"I've had enough of these requests."

"Ahahahaha, sorry. But it won't hurt Shefa."

"It doesn't matter, it feels bad to trick a kid."

Sharnid frowned at the smiling Claribel.

Right.

The bullet Sharnid shot had certainly hit Alsheyra in the chest.

But would Grendan's most powerful Military Artist just silently take Sharnid's sniping?

Such a thing couldn't happen.

"Though I did snipe Layfon before. But back then I took advantage of his weariness and tense nerves to get him."

Sharnid suddenly thought of the past, so he muttered those words.

In other words, this was just an act.

It was just a game where the sniper and the sniped were both aware.

He hadn't used a Kei bullet, but rather a paint bullet filled with blood for transfusion.

"Speaking of which, what's the point of doing this?"

"Hmm~~ It's a custom of ours, something like a tradition."

Claribel said this. It felt more like she was too lazy to explain than not allowed to tell the truth. Sharnid sighed.

"Also, there's an expert stronger than me here, so couldn't you ask her?"

"If I asked her, it might not be an act."

"Give me a break."

"Hehehe. But Sharnid-senpai, you accomplished the goal too."

"Ugh."

Sharnid groaned as she poked him.

"That's how it is, so here's your reward."

Claribel gave him a palm-sized wooden box as she said this.

"Though I just happened to get it by coincidence, is this thing really that desirable?"

"Judging by the reward, your initial target must have been me all along."

"Well, I heard that Sharnid-senpai's father loves women, and my master happens to have that same trait, so I didn't really want to call him over."

"Well, sorry about that."

"Well, Senpai has the same trait too anyways."

"Well, sorry about that!"

"Yeah, that's how the order should be."

"Uwah!"

The degree to which he was seen through made Sharnid yelp.

"If she's that important, why don't you just stop playing around ?"

"Those are two different things."

"I can't understand."

She looked over speechlessly after stating that.

Sharnid had gotten what he wanted, so it didn't matter what anyone else said.

Sharnid lightly stroked the wooden box in his hands with a finger. The box was an expensive, decorated object, possibly something Claribel had chosen.

"Well, Shefa's pretty much realized the truth, or maybe he's getting angry again. We should prepare for the next step."

Claribel said that as she left the room.

With his back to her, Sharnid opened the box he had received in order to check its contents.

The object kept inside it was a pendant. The chain had been pulled open, and part of it had melted together. The part connecting the chain and the jewelry had also melted together. Maybe that was why the two hadn't been separated, or why it had been noticed.

No, this was undoubtedly a miracle regardless of the chain.

Though half of the pendant had been melted together, the jewelry could still be recognized as a spear and shield.

A name was engraved on the somewhat-melted spear.

Dalshena.

"Well, I hope this helps that girl to cool down."

Sharnid's battle was only beginning now.

Claribel Ronsmier.

Claribel walked in high spirits.

"Alright, my time's finally come!"

She walked in the hallway as she thought about the next thing in line.

"First is the crowning ceremony, and then~~"

As she thought about these things, a presence approached the residence.

Though she thought that Shefa might have broken in, this presence wasn't his.

Claribel hurried to the main entrance to welcome him.

"What, it's you."

"What a mean tone~"

It was Haia who had come.

"This city is just as outrageous as always~"

"Isn't that obvious? After all, even that kind of person was able to become the Queen."

After Haia made that complaint, Claribel looked at him with a surprised 'how did you only realize that now' gaze.

"Never mind that, how's Shefa?"

"Just like I imagined~"

"Ah, as I thought."

"After all, even though she's like that, she's still his mother. Even if it's an act, he'll obviously get confused when something like that happens right in front of him~"

"But it was Her Majesty who brought it up, so it'll be unfair if he keeps a grudge against me or Sharnid-senpai."

"Well, maybe."

"Well then, do you have anything to tell me?"

"Ahh, right, right. She says to proceed according to plan, and good luck."

"That's it?"

"Yeah, that's right~"

"For only a couple words, couldn't she have just gotten Elsmau to tell me?"

"She's mad about it~"

"Ahh, since she's so virtuous."

"That's how she was about Her Majesty's prank, but she was also unhappy about not noticing the sniper~"

"It was tiring to find someone of that caliber outside the city. I ended up relying on connections."

"I can't imagine much talent over there either~"

Claribel felt like some kind of emotions were buried in Haia's tone.

"Come to think of it I remember you fought against Layfon before, right?'

"That's my life, manipulated by the Grendan Royal Families~"

"Then please be manipulated by me next."

"Will it be that successful?"

"I'll make it successful."

Claribel smiled boldly after saying this.

Mifi Rotten.

The Queen fell.

Shefa cried as he rushed out towards the possible direction of the sniper.

Just as the atmosphere turned to that of an uproar.

"That's how it is, I'm dead "

Alsheyra suddenly got up and said.

".....Hey, you."

Leerin sighed speechlessly.

She had even lost the energy to get mad. Alsheyra spoke to her:

"No no no, I'm pretty serious. Although I'm just playing dead."

"I realize that!"

Leerin thundered, forcing herself to look angry.

"The important point is, why are you doing something like this? "

"Hmm, politics?"

"What politics?"

"No no no, this is something important. It's more accurate to call it a ceremony. Once the Queen dies, we'll have to decide a successor, right?"

"What are you saying? In the end you're just playing dead, right ?"

"Even if I'm playing dead, it's unsuitable for the Queen of Grendan to get shot in the heart by a sniper, right?"

"..... Ah."

Leerin seemed to understand what Alsheyra was conveying.

"That's right."

Feeling satisfied with this, Alsheyra said.

Grendan's monarch had to be strong.

She had to lead the Heaven's Blade successors and drive off attacking filth monsters.

That was Grendan's monarch.

"In other words, even if it's only temporary, an accidental death has happened. So I've already lost my rights to the throne."

"I feel like you're being unreasonable."

Leerin still held her head.

"In that case, are you planning on giving away the throne?"

"That's right."

"I remember that first among the current throne successors is....."

"Oh my! I won't let things end that simply."

Leerin could only make a detesting expression at Alsheyra's high spirits.

"It's the duty of the previous monarch to figure out how to decide the throne. It's too boring to decide just by order of successions, so I want to hold a big event."

"Normally, I think dead people wouldn't be able to give input on how to decide succession."

"I'll be resourceful."

"You're too free-spirited, so there will be problems."

"Okay, okay. That's how it is, so I want to gather all of the throne successors and hold a big event. Leerin, do you want to be there? Right now it would be fine to call yourself Eutnohl again."

"I don't want that."

"Huh~ Don't say that. If you're like that, the Eutnohls won't have any shining light."

".....I'm getting mad."

"Tch."

That kind of conversation unfolded before her.

Mifi was just dumbstruck.

As for why.....

"I came here because I heard there was a dispute among successors for the throne. I didn't think it would happen right in front of my eyes."

Even Mifi couldn't help but think this some kind of joke.

"Actually, where'd you hear that from?"

"Huh? It's a very popular rumor right now."

Mifi replied to Leerin's question with a natural expression.

Her lifelessness and slumped shoulders looked very strange.

In any case, Mifi succeeded in covering the Throne Succession Battle held in Grendan.

The World Times had pictures of the battle from start to finish, and hence it became a miracle that sold out no matter how much was printed.

Thus, the informational magazine called the 'World Times' crossed the boundaries between cities and became well-known over a large area, and not long afterwards the whole world was reading it.

At the same time, the strength of Grendan's Military Artists spread, and soon afterwards it was known to be a holy land for Military Artists.

And Mifi, who succeeded in writing this report, continued to be a capable reporter of the World Times.....

As for whether she would grow or not, that was up to what she did next.

High Booster

There was a city in the wilderness.

It seemed to be a city that had perished before its foundations were formed, and hence not a single bit of greenery was visible on the earth around her. The dry, cracked ground wasn't suited to the kind of vehicle she was riding.

Nina gave up on it, getting off her motorcycle.

"How is it?"

(There's no movement.)

The Psychokinesis flake sewn into the white fighting gear replied to Nina's question in a dry voice.

"How are the inspections of the interior?"

(The interference is very severe, so we can't get any useful information right now.)

"What about the surroundings?"

(Right. We noticed many traces of large moving objects, and they ought to have been left behind recently.)

"In that case, there's definitely someone preparing something inside."

(Yes, the teams are currently moving to the designated location. Commander, you.....)

"I'm moving up."

Nina stopped the Psychokinesist from speaking and moved forward.

The city she could see in the distance was entangled with machinery that had gone out of control, and they had all withered. Extensive dry moss covered the decaying city like a canopy, as if to conceal this corpse.

But what if that veil wasn't just hiding the corpse of the city?

"Stupid Searcher."

Nina muttered quietly.

A meeting several days ago was the reason she had come here.

It was sometimes referred to dramatically as 'The Night the Sky Fell'.

The world had started changing greatly since that night they had fought against that violent flame.

Some of the first changes that happened were the reduction of pollutants and the subsequent reduction in filth monsters.

Along with the stoppage of the autonomous moving cities (Regios).

The wilderness reclamation work headed by Karian Loss's Pioneering Group was affecting many cities and people. People quickly started leaving the moving cities.

At the same time, problems of territorial ownership occurred between people who lived on the unmoving earth and the moving cities that roamed the land, but those problems didn't stay for long and didn't become serious.

Because afterwards, the phenomenon known as the 'Budding' occurred, where the moving cities stopped.

It was confirmed at the beginning that the moving cities had stopped moving, but they didn't end up stopping completely. Organic machinery composed of dense plants rapidly proliferated as if out of control, and roots eroded the land of city and even spread to the surrounding area.

Not long afterwards, the cities became huge tree and regenerated the surrounding land. The various microorganisms and trees formed by plants penetrated deep into the ground, recreating the cycles of a natural world.

The people driven out of the cities by the Budding quickly adapted to their new environment thanks to the land's regeneration and the combined efforts of the Loss Pioneering Group and other pioneers.

And like that, humans returned to an unmoving ground.

Not long afterwards, the pioneering group formed a nation, and communication and transportation within the nation was gradually set up appropriately. Finally, a common calendar was produced.

Year fourteen of the New Earth calendar.

That was the current era.

The location where they had agreed to meet was a road called Euphter.

"Ugh....."

A landmark of the meeting place was a beautiful fountain statue . Nina tilted her head and looked confused in front of it. She checked the watch on her wrist and also checked the clock in the statue's arms.

The time was the same.

And the time of their meeting had already passed.

"She's usually very timely."

Nina looked at the road after murmuring this.

In the distance was a Regios, an expanding canopy of green.

Her chest throbbed when she gazed at the image of the moving city transformed into a mother tree.

The first to 'Bud' had been Ahasnahart. Nina had witnessed her determination first-hand.

The mother tree she saw over there wasn't Ahasnahart, but her determination had certainly become the foundations of the current era.

"We must change along with the times. That's true for all living things. It's just our form that is different from humans."

After leaving those words, the mother of the Electronic Fairies, Schneibel, had moved to become a mother tree.

"Speaking of which....."

Nina pulled her consciousness back to reality, as if to escape from her thoughts.

"She's not the kind of person to come late."

But the person Nina had planned on finding was a person she had been connected to in the past. She wanted to think about their friendship, but memories kept surfacing like bubbles.

Just when Nina was unsure how to deal with her feelings, reality called out to her.

She heard a quiet voice mixed in with the group of people.

It was the voice of a person.

A muffled wail.

The moment she heard that voice, Nina was no longer where she had been. The gust of wind that blew in that instant made the nearby pedestrians stop for a moment. But none of them were able to think of the fact that Nina had just been over there, so they continued walking.

Though the city center was clean, dirty blemishes became visible when you walked around the city. Maze-like alleys, tall buildings that seemed to be jostling with one another, smells that accumulated in the shadows..... Humans had had managed their limited land well before, but after being granted infinitely vast land, that mentality had crumbled right away. People were quick to look away from the problems they created and start something new somewhere else.

The vast land gave people the illusion that it was infinite. The momentous changes to society and the expansion into this land led the brain to keep pushing the idea of 'development' forward, and the phrase 'maintenance' was forgotten.

This place was another area that had forgotten about the maintenance work.

Crime occurred readily because it had become hard to see.

The woman who was being taken away in front of her was a victim of crime too.

Three men ran holding the woman. Something like a bag was over the woman's face. Those people had attacked her from behind and rapidly covered her eyes and mouth with the bag, and then put her over their backs. The way the woman looked made the scene from back then appear in her mind.

"Hey!"

Nina took the initiative to circle around in front of them and called out to stop them.

Nina's sudden appearance made the men stop. Wails from under the bag reached her ears.

"Do you know who she is?"

A knife answered Nina's question.

Along with fast movements.

Military Artists.

Judging by how all three of them took out knives, the men were clearly residents of the streets. Knives were definitely better than swords as a weapon in this kind of narrow alley.

Their movements were quite skilled, to approach her at high speed in this narrow alley without bumping into each other.

But Nina didn't even hold a Dite.

After confirming that the woman had been released, she stepped forward unarmed, slipping through the gaps between the men like water and dodging their attack. Then she caught the woman.

Nina took off the bag.

"Guah! Ack, ugh..... Huh, Nina?"

"Are you alright, Leu?"

"B.....Barely..... Uh, what happened?"

"You were kidnapped."

Nina turned around after saying this to the wide-eyed Leu.

The three men were all unconscious on the ground.

"If you were five kilomels[8] farther, even I probably wouldn't have heard your voice."

"Uh, I wouldn't walk that far alone either."

Nina's words put a stunned expression on Leu's face.

After that, Leu checked the men herself.

"Are they dead?"

"No, I just put them to sleep. What should we do? Police?"

"No, they don't know anything anyway."

"Yeah."

Nina reached inside the pockets of one of the men, but there was nothing that could verify their identities.

"Don't worry about it. We're almost too late for our reservation, so let's go."

After fixing her messed-up hair with an expression of disgust, Leu looked at her watch and cried out again.

She wore a suit. There was no falsity in her words or actions - no expressions of weakness like trembling fingers.

".....You've become very strong, Leu."

"Don't look down on a negotiator."

Her back honestly looked very reliable as she bravely said that.

They made it to the place they had reserved.

This store of local Euphter cuisine was one that Leu had discovered, so it was very delicious.

"I said I was looking, but it's more like I'm having other people look. Well, it's basically gathering intelligence."

"Ah, I see."

"Right, how come you moved the Third to Nairomiro?"

"Ahh, that's a countermeasure against Searchers."

"What's your real purpose?"

"......It's the truth that there are Searchers."

Nina glanced around.

The store had prepared a booth for them. This area was deep inside the store, so their voices wouldn't leak outside. At least as long as there weren't any Psychokinesis flakes or listening devices.

Even if she listened intently, she couldn't hear any strange mechanical noises or the unique sound of Psychokinesis flakes.

No, as a wartime negotiator for the National Coalition, she wouldn't have made such a blunder.

"What a pain. I can understand why they want to station troops there beforehand, but that's why the other party's attitude became stubborn at such a strange time."

"There's no helping it. Humans were forced to hold their territorial wars and such for later."

"So you're admitting that those are unavoidable."

"Some people think it's just swapping out the Selenium mines we fought for during the city ear for territory. But I feel the same about keeping it from happening."

"In that case, I hope that you could move your troops to a less visible place. Waiting the National Coalition's Third Army commanded by High Booster over there is the same as an undisguised threat of mutual destruction."

"The other side was the one to miss the negotiation deadline."

"Well, whatever. Even with this, the ceasefire managed to achieve its goals."

"Honestly, that was great."

"Of course. If not, it would be impossible for me to eat with you so casually without bodyguards."

"You say that, but you're still pretty mad."

"Because I don't like the way it was ended. Stubbornly denying other opinions from start to finish can only lead to a short life. Nina, if it were you, you'd be able to say something to those higher-ups, right?"

"I don't want to see them."

Nina frowned at Leu's words.

"Why?"

"They're really talkative right now. If I as much as walk up to the higher-ups, there'll be gossip about it."

"Uwah, then do they think dispatching the Third Army until reconciliation occurs is all just Zuellni's show of force?"

"That's actually pretty much what they were working with."

"Ahh, how annoying!"

"Let's not keep talking about that, it ruins the mood."

"Honestly."

They had finished eating the food during the talk. But perhaps their topic hadn't been conducive to the mood, so she hadn't been able to taste anything.

Leu seemed to be the same.

"Ahh, honestly, might as well order more."

Leu called the waiter over to get a menu. It seemed like she had given up.

"How youthful."

Nina murmured with mixed feelings as she looked at Leu.

"Hah?"

Leu showed a clearly detestful expression upon hearing this.

"What does that mean, are you insulting me?"

"No, that's not it....."

"It's a bit weird for a high-ranking Military Artist to mention something like age."

"My bad, my bad."

Nina knew she had misspoken, so she couldn't muster any opposition. She decided to surrender immediately.

"Don't be ridiculous, alright? How much work do you think it takes to maintain my figure and looks? It's just today that I can indulge myself. Ahh, those stupid geezers make me so mad, to think they would show an expression like 'what, it's you again'! I can't let those other female assistants steal the spotlight. It's so annoying..... Are young girls really that good?"

"I was wrong! Honestly, I was wrong!"

Also, it seemed like she had made Leu think of something unrelated.

Nina could only apologize continuously as the food was being sent to them.

In the end, Nina took care of almost all of the food.

"Well, what do you think?"

The location hadn't changed. The food on the table had disappeared, and the two of them held glasses in their hands.

"About what?"

"The guys just now. Don't forget about them."

She wasn't drunk, but Leu asked this with a completely straight face. Nina felt stunned at this.

"After all, it's been the same feeling everywhere recently. Every faction is very strong, so I end up getting put through a lot of trouble as the one responsible for negotiations."

"Then was it retaliation by some faction?"

"......Hmm, that's very improbable. There's a different possibility that's more likely."

"What is it?"

"They planned on using me, Nina's good friend, as a hostage to make you and the Third Army retreat from Nairomiro."

"What?"

"It's the Searchers. Do you know what those guys are like?"

"I got information that they were occupying an abandoned city."

"Do you know anything about that abandoned city?"

"No..... Do you have any clues?"

"I'm not sure either. But I said before that I didn't like the way negotiations ended this time, right?"

"Yeah, you did."

"Though the pressure from the Third Army also had an effect, it seems like one reason was to keep us from putting our focus on the abandoned city near Nairomiro."

"What?"

"I feel like they were fighting more to occupy that abandoned city than to occupy Nairomiro. They were also making a fuss about the area during territory division negotiations..... though both sides were trying to hide their focus."

"How did it end up being resolved?"

"It was turned into a buffer region of the National Coalition, isn't that obvious?"

Leu put on a proud smile after she said that.

After leaving that information that Nina couldn't understand, her good friend took an escorted car back.

Nina felt like that look suited her very well.

Leu had negotiated several conflicts between nations so far, and she was respected by many for being able to maintain her calm.

At the same time, she was envied by many.

That was why she couldn't even spend a minute of her life without bodyguards.

"I really feel sorry for her."

If Nina had been attentive, she could have had the pleasure of walking alone on the road where she had protected Leu from the unfamiliar men in the brief period of time before their meeting.

Though Nina had never had such a considerate personality, she felt like her awareness of others had faded recently.

"I have to be careful."

After murmuring this, the Commander of the National Coalition's Third Army started walking without any guards by her side.

The information Leu had left her was in her mind.

As a negotiator, Leu knew detailed inside information about various nations. If she didn't even know, it would be impossible to dig up information with any political means.

Then.....?

(Commander, it's about time.)

It was a scheduled contact from a Psychokinesist of the command center.

"Yeah, I'm going back soon. Oh, one thing."

(Yes?)

"Prepare means for international communication for me."

(Understood. How strong should the security should it be?)

"It doesn't need any, I'm just looking for someone."

(What?)

Ignoring the confused voice, Nina vanished into the nighttime road.

After returning to the Third Army barracks, Nina got the necessary means for communication from the Psychokinesist group, then returned straight to her living quarters.

The person she had contacted just now was already standing in front of the room given to her.

"Fufufufu, I'm from E&E Pizza, thanks for your order."

Nina hadn't interacted much with her in Zuellni. In the end, she had just been a friend of Felli.

But after graduation, Nina would run into her once in a while, and their relationship had developed to the point where the two of them would now visit each other at a moment's notice.

"You're still the same as always."

Eri held a pizza box in front of the door. She had a youthfulness completely different from Leu's spirited youthfulness or Nina's vigorous youthfulness. It was as if time had stopped for her.

She seemed bewitching - that kind of description seemed very appropriate.

But Nina didn't spend any time asking about anything like that. She currently realized that was undoubtedly just a waste of time.

After inviting Eri into the room, Nina opened the pizza. After giving Eri a drink, Nina told her what Leu had said while holding the pizza.

"Nairomiro, huh? Uh, that's pretty far."

Eri said leisurely.

En - that was a means of movement by Electronic Fairies. It seemed like that kind of spatial leap that Nina had experienced before was different from Eri's methods.

Well, that was completely irrelevant.

The more you know, the more you feel like you know useless information - a good friend of her had said that.

"Well, what do you think about this?"

"Fufufu, well..... Can you get me a map?"

Eri tilted her head slightly and Nina pulled out a map for her.

"Nairomiro is here."

"Ehh..... Ah, we're here. Uh, and..... Ahh, it's Zuellni. Fufufufufu, how nostalgic."

".....Hmm, they're still staying independently autonomous as an Academy City over there."

"Nina-senpai, are you supporting them too?"

"I'm doing what I can."

"How incredible."

"So, how about it?"

"Well."

Eri repeated similar words as she looked back and forth across them and chatted about her memories.

But this wasn't because her focus was broken. Eri was judging exactly Nairomiro was based on the positions she remembered on the map. That was how she calculated distance, Nina had realized after many years of interacting with her.

So Nina stayed as patient as she could with Eri while making sure to keep her from straying too far from the topic.

"Ahh, I got it."

Then, Eri finally clapped her hands.

"I see, I see, it means there's a gathering of Searchers."

"What? What did you figure out?"

"Fufufufufu, good news."

After she said this, Eri erased the normally-gloomy expression from her face, smiling cheerfully.

"Those people are coming back."

The next morning, Nina led a team to that abandoned city.

And now, Nina was here.

(The interference is too strong, so I can't interpret the situation in side at all. Commander, keep your distance for now.)

"I can't do that, since our time here is limited."

(In that case, please order the other teams to conduct reconnaissance. Commander, if anything happens to you.....)

"Your missions are to keep the Searchers leaving the city from escaping, so you don't need to leave your initial positions."

(Understood.)

As the conversation ended, Nina reached the legs of the abandoned city.

Nina deliberately approached slowly, but no hostile movements occurred up through that point.

But Nina confirmed with her own eyes what the Psychokinesists had noticed - traces of large moving objects.

Nina's nose also smelled the scent of living organisms.

"They're here."

That was the only thing she could confirm.

Nina leaped up to the top of the city. Of course, there was no sensation of an air filter. Even in the current era, where air filters were unnecessary, it felt very lonesome to not sense that slight resistance.

The outer area was swallows up by withered vines. They fell apart easily as soon as she stepped on them.

Internal Kei variant - Levitation.

Nina counteracted her body weight with Kei of a special nature and advanced over the vines.

Judging by the structures under the vines, it seemed that this place had been a region that accommodated foreigners.

"This is....."

Nina noticed a sign near the entrance. Vines had hooked around it during the proliferation of organic machinery, so it had fallen down. Nina pulled the sign, which still hadn't rusted, away from the vines.

"Sky Spider City Terachda..... is it?"

A name she hadn't heard of before.

But since it had turned into this, it had definitely already been abandoned before its 'Budding'.

What exactly had destroyed them? Was it filth monsters, or exhausted Selenium mines? Neither of them was a threat anymore.

Nina sped up her steps and advanced into the depths of the city .

"So, when will they act?"

She advanced with unguarded movements and without even drawing her Dite, provoking the opponents to act.

Just as Nina expected, the opponents finally acted.

The quiet air became disturbed.

Nina stopped.

A disturbance had appeared in the air. But the opponents hadn't shown up yet.

The vines beneath her feet had been thrown into a mess. It seemed like the opponents had no intentions of camouflaging the interior of the city.

But the opponents still hadn't shown themselves.

What were their plans?

"No....."

Nina strode forward again.

With every step, the tension in the air became stronger. Was it because the opponents were thinking about how to keep her from continuing to approach?

Or was it because Nina was at in the jaws of death, unwittingly stepping into her enemy's trap?

"Whichever it is....."

The situation would progress as long as she strode forward.

In that case, all she needed to do was advance.

Nina waited for the opponents with that mindset.

The situation changed with the next step Nina took.

The vines covering the ground below her feet floated up together.

No, that was wrong. It wasn't the vines that had moved.

The ground had twisted.

The abruptly-lowering ground left the vines in the air.

Along with Nina.

"Ugh!"

Nina was offsetting her weight with Kei to move on the vines, which was why she was able to descend to the ground instead of falling.

"Are they making their move? In that case, what's going to show up?"

Nina was speaking of the lowered ground.

As the disturbed vines withered and tangled together, a wriggling presence appeared in the depths of the dark hole.

Was this a trap to make Nina fall down? If that were the case, had the opponent believed they could kill Nina just by making her fall? That way of thinking surprised Nina. A trap of this level wouldn't even kill a normal Military Artist.

Also, the Searchers had already accumulated a great deal of battle experience against Military Artists. Even if their numbers had decreased, they probably wouldn't use such a simple trap.

"Something's there."

Nina already sensed that presence close to her.

After all, the downward movement had stopped part of the way through. Judging by that, she could confirm that there was something hiding there.

The sound had vanished.

The earth that had been the cover crumbled and fell. Then, the sound of crashing that ought to have occurred afterwards vanished partway through.

Something that had made the sound disappear was hiding in the depths of that giant hole.

Would that thing whose first strike had failed continue hiding?

"Is it coming?"

A new quake shook the abandoned city.

Something was about to crawl out of the giant hole dug in the city.

Nina stopped the hand that was reaching for her Dite.

She thought of something.

"Fufufufufu, I'll give Nina-senpai a divination."

"What is it?"

Eri had said this when she was about to go back.

"Don't destroy the city too severely and you'll get good luck."

Eri hadn't ended up explaining what that meant.

Even if it had already become an abandoned city, Nina didn't plan on treating an autonomous moving city (Regios) and a former home of men too roughly.

That being said, considering Nina's current destructive power, she had to be careful with where she swung her iron whips.

"How irritating!"

After impatiently shouting this, Nina raised her head to look at the thing that appeared.

Black mist - a gaseous object that looked like this appeared from the giant hole.

However, even if such a thing existed, it was very strange for the large-scale crumbling noise to have completely vanished.

This wasn't an ordinary gas.

The black gaseous body ignored the roaring wind and stopped in place, and a change came over it.

Countless holes opened in the gaseous body.

No, they weren't holes. They were eyes that were opening.

Eyes appeared.

In addition, countless protruding teeth appeared all over the gaseous body. The sound of their clashing together made the surrounding air ominously shake.

"I've confirmed the Searchers."

Nina said this to the Psychokinesis flake, but there was no reply . It seemed that the Psychokinesis interference was still continuing.

"I hope they don't act too recklessly."

Starting a battle when the Psychokinesis communication network was broken made Nina worry that the teams' positions outside the city would become disorganized and that the surrounding net would crumble.

Though she was worried, Nina still had to deal with this thing right here.

Nina believed in the training of her teams and increased her Kei flow.

The countless eyes on the black gaseous body looked at Nina. The sound of the teeth became more intense, a sign of hostility.

"Isn't it about tie to say what exactly your goals are?"

Nina tried asking jokingly.

Of course, the black mist couldn't tell her the answer.

Year nine of the New Earth Calendar.

During the creation of a new international society, a certain nation carried out an experiment.

The National Coalition was currently dealing with the aftermath of that experiment, but the start of it all was the contraption of a scholar who had made a nation into his puppet.

That scholar had been unable to forget the miracles shown by the Erdhart Gate[9], so he had used the funds of his puppet nation to carry out a plan.

That plan, which had been called the 'Severed Space Investigation Plan', had been a journey to realize the other side of this world.

The goal of that experiment was to reach the other side of the rift in the sky that appeared between night and day. Unfortunately , that experiment had succeeded. With its success, cracks appeared in the space and the Aurora field, which could be called the other side of the world, appeared.

However, it wasn't traces of the Erdhart Gate that appeared there.

In place of it were nightmare that named Searchers.

That scholar was the one to name the nightmares, but no one ever heard about the origins of the name.

The Searchers' goals were unclear to this day. They would sometimes appear randomly and attack humans, and sometimes they would gather in a place to scheme things like this.

Were they watching something in this world like their name implied, or was that name just a mistake that had become mainstream?

No matter what the answer was, this nightmare endangered humans.

"That's why I'll defeat you!"

The black mist started changing.

The Searcher separated into countless ribbon-shaped bodies that attacked Nina.

Nina retreated backwards while pouring Key into her hands and deciphering the movements of the ribbons.

The moment a ribbon lunged towards Nina, Nina would release the Kei gathered in her hands at where she was standing and then retreat back.

External Kei variant - Untouchable Beast King.

It was a dense Kei, unlike the thin Kei that covered Nina. The Kei compressed to its limits in her palms created gravity and drew in the surrounding objects towards it.

The ribbon-shaped mists that tried to bite Nina were all absorbed by the ball of concentrated Kei and slowly crushed inside it.

The Searcher continued approaching Nina, unconcerned that a part of it was being eliminated by the compressed sphere. Even if it was aware this was a trap, its attack patterns were very monotonous.

No, were they monotonous or not?

Or did it just think that it wouldn't matter whether they were monotonous or not?

This could be because the Searchers had already filled the entire abandoned city.

Nina changed her route without confirming the presence that came from behind her. She released the compressed spheres of Untouchable Beast King one by one on her path of retreat. The compressed spheres didn't maintain their gravity for very long. Even so, they ought to be accurately whittling away at her opponent, but her opponent looked unconcerned.

Maybe the Searchers didn't have an organism's nervous system for self-management.

"That's why it's easy for me to lay a trap."

Nina, who moved while floating as if gliding over the ground, suddenly stopped her horizontal movement.

Vertical movement.

Nina stopped her floating and leaped upwards.

Even if her movement methods were quite rapid, the Searcher still closely pursued Nina with its gaseous forms.

Her leap carried her past the vine-covered tall buildings and also passed the air filter that had once been there, continuing to bring Nina towards the sky.

The Searcher chased Nina.

From the center of the abandoned city, from the gaps between buildings, from every alley, from every window. They passed through the cracks in the ground, through the shattered glass,

through the spaces between vines, and constantly rose from where Nina would land while blotting out the entirety of the Sky Spider City Terachda.

"They've all come out, huh."

Nina didn't fight with those tremendous numbers. Rather, she continuously spun the Kei she was keeping compressed.

She let the Kei spin.

Compressing it further.

External Kei Variant - Double Untouchable Beast King.

She pushed the two compressed spheres in her hands together.

The compressed spheres that were forced together changed, and the impact produced sent Nina flying.

On the other hand, the compressed spheres interfered with each other and unleased powerful gravity on the surroundings that couldn't be compared to that from earlier.

The powerful gravity caught all of the Searchers crawling out from the city, pulling them together towards the compressed spheres.

That was Nina's goal.

The black, gaseous forms of the Searchers were captured by the gravity from the compressed spheres and tangled together in the sky.'

Still safe from the gravity waves released form her Kei technique, Nina preemptively escaped from its effective region.

The place she went just happened to be the bottom of the big hole where the Searcher had hidden itself.

"Hah!"

After landing, Nina restored two iron whips in her hands and gripped them firmly.

"It's over."

In that moment, Kei shot out from her entire body.

The light of Kei drove the darkness away from the deeply-dug hole, becoming a pillar of light and shooting towards the city.

The light of Kei only filled the city for a moment. The swelling light of Kei focused inside Nina's body, circulated, rotated, and transformed, and then flowed into her two iron whips.

The step she took crushed the rubble.

Electricity ran through the surrounding air and exploded with sparks.

The breath she exhaled was filled with electricity. Nina sprinted at lightning speed at the same time as she swung her iron whips.

Combined internal and external Kei variant - Raijin.

The two released strikes of lightning sped towards the compressed sphere.

Lightning ran from the ground to the sky, splitting open the black mist of the Searcher and burning them with its heat.

The iron whips she swung shattered the compressed sphere.

The sphere, which had still been effective, collapsed onto itself from the gravity released when Raijin destroyed it. The energy produced became a shockwave that tore open the sky.

The Searchers that had been pulled into the air by the compressed sphere had nowhere to escape.

An explosive sound drowned out everything, so no one heard the wail of the Searchers.

After escaping the black mist and the purple lightning that covered the sky, Nina once again stepped on the ground of the Sky Spider City.

(.....C.....Commander!)

A voice sounded from the Psychokinesis flake.

"You can get through now?"

(Commander! Are you safe?)

"Yeah, but I let some enemies get away. Tell the teams not to let them escape and to investigate whether there are still enemies lurking inside the city."

(Understood.)

After cutting the communication, Nina returned her Dites to her weapon belt.

The smell of the battle's aftermath and the withered vines filled the area.

A different stench also rose up through the air stirred up by the battle. A putrid, dry stench filled the abandoned city, and judging by how it leaned more towards the cry side, she could infer that this abandoned city had spent a very long time like this.

"Don't destroy the city too severely and you'll get good luck."

Nina had listened to that proposal, but still didn't know what it meant. Nina herself hadn't destroyed anything, but what about the things the Searcher had destroyed? Nina started becoming restless when she thought of that.

She thought of the other thing Eri had said.

She said they would return.

She could understand why there were Searchers here if they were returning. Since the Searchers had also come from over there.

However, even so, why would they stay here? Did they have some kind of plan? Or were they just feeling the presence of the other side and gathering here like flies?

There were still many mysteries about the Searchers.

They still hadn't gotten any information about the people who had been on the other side - Airen, Saya, and Nelphilia.

"We'd be able to learn the truth if they were here."

But Nina couldn't just complain. Battles against the Searchers would still continue in the future. They couldn't discover the true identity of the Searchers just by sitting back and waiting for those people to take care of everything, since they didn't even know whether they were still alive.

That was why the plan was still going on.

The Severed Space Investigation Plan.

The scholar who had first thought of that plan had single-mindedly wanted to reach the other side of the world, but the National Coalition had stolen that plan from the scholar's hands in order to discover the truth of the Searchers.

However, they still hadn't gotten any results.

The travelers who had headed to the other side for the second repeat of the plan still hadn't returned.

"Will they really come back?"

Though Eri had said so, Nina was still unconvinced. She hoped to herself that it was the case.

But a resigned feeling that it would be impossible also hid in Nina's heart.

(Commander, the remaining enemies have been finished off. We've also inspected the abandoned city. There aren't any Searchers still there.)

"I see."

(There's still the problem of our time limit here. It's about time to withdraw--)

"Wait."

Nina stopped the Psychokinesist's words.

"I'm going to wait here until I can't wait anymore. Things can't end like this."

(But.....)

"Prepare to withdraw."

(Understood.)

Nina ignored the Psychokinesist's questioning tone and wandered the city on her own. She had no goal, she was just walking through the roads because she couldn't stand still and do nothing.

But nothing changed.

She was just mindlessly wandering through the tranquil abandoned city. Nina even started feeling like she was ridiculous for doing this.

No, was that all?

".....Damn."

Nina had forgotten something.

Eri only talked about things she deemed important.

What had Leu said?

She had said the two nations fighting over Nairomiro had both been eyeing this abandoned city.

Why were they focused on this place? Leu said that they seemed to know that something would happen here.

Why were they still eyeing this abandoned city that had long since been abandoned and which had now become a nest of Searchers?

Why were the Searchers here?

Were the three of them all focused on the same thing?

Then, was something really going to happen here?

(Commander, time's almost up.)

"Yeah, I know."

Nina nodded at the Psychokinesist's words.

Even if there was the possibility, Nina couldn't ignore the promise between Nations and stay in this location.

(Actually, we received information that two nation's armies have invaded this buffer region.)

"What?"

(They're still avoiding conflict right now.)

"Ugh....."

As expected, there was something here, but there was no time.

Just as Nina decided to withdraw despite her worries.

A change happened.

A nearby building split open.

"Uh....."

Even Nina, the high-ranking Military Artist High Booster who had fought hundreds of battles, couldn't help but be surprised at the scene of a tall building suddenly becoming two halves.

In other words, there had been no signs at all that this was going to happen.

No, more accurately, there hadn't been anything that a Military Artist could detect with her senses.

It wasn't a rift cut open in the physical dimension.

"Are they coming?"

It wasn't the building that split, but rather space itself.

"An abnormal situation has occurred. All teams prepare for battle. But there's no need to force yourselves, withdraw at your own judgment."

Nina was also very concerned that the two armies that had infiltrated the buffer region would do something.

(.....)

"Tch!"

No response. Was the communication broken?

As Nina was about to pull away to observe the rift, she noticed something else.

The rift wasn't only in front of her.

There were also rifts in other areas.

Rifts had appeared in every corner of the city. Colors seeped from them into the darkness and then slowly vanished.

What was happening?

Would the Searchers appear again?

In some sense, that way of thinking was accurate.

The difference was their shape.

Something appeared from the first rift she had noticed.

It was so huge that Nina didn't know what it was at first.

It was a hand.

A giant hand peeked over from the other side of the rift.

The hand was black. That pure-black hand pushed open the rift and showed the face it belonged to.

Occupying the other side was a darkness that would be prominent even in the dead of night. Perhaps that was its entire body.

A giant eyeball occupied half of the space on its head.

The rift continued being pulled open to its limits, and the giant body was dragged to the world on this side.

The giant's body was almost the same as a human's. It had two hands and two feet, along with a torso to support them. The different part was that the giant only had one eyeball, and its size.

Its contour swayed gently, as if it were stretching.

"As I thought, a Searcher."

Nina concluded after seeing that figure.

This darkness was probably a thicker form of the thing that had formed the gaseous bodies from before.

Would that kind of thing turn into this if it solidified while hiding in a city? No, Nina felt like it wouldn't turn into this.

In that case, did it mean that this single-eyed giant appearing before her was even stronger than the one before?

Many such things were appearing here.

Giants jumped out from the other rifts in addition to the one in front of her.

This itself wasn't unusual.

"Honestly, how did things become this way?"

That was why Nina murmured this.

It had been the same when Ahasnahart's determination had sent the Electronic Fairies into turmoil.

It had been the same during the commotion from the alchemist ghost the research team had dug up.

It had been the same during the assassination attempt on Karian during the development of the nations, and it had been the same afterwards when the National Coalition had been established.

Almost every trouble involving Nina had been more or less the same.

Enemies would suddenly appear and show powerful fighting strength.

Nina would fight, fight, and keep fighting with these beings, which was why she had become who she was now.

"Why won't this world ever have peaceful days?"

Nina murmured gripingly as she restored her iron whips again.

Eri had made a request to destroy the abandoned city as little as possible. But with this, it seemed like she wouldn't be able to keep that promise.

"Will such a large-scale space abnormality be limited to within the abandoned city?"

Maybe the teams positioned outside the city were also in danger .

"I guess I can't keep waiting?"

Maybe she had also been looking forward to the reunion at long last.

"I have to withdraw."

After Nina decided this, a one-eyed giant attacked as if to interrupt her.

"Tch!"

Countless fangs sprouted from that hand, extending out and becoming spears.

The shooting spears wiped out the surrounding buildings as they attacked Nina.

It looked like they wanted to block Nina's path of retreat.

The spears that looked as thick as Nina's body smashed the structures as they approached. Nina jumped to avoid the spears' attacks, but afterwards a large amount of debris became a wave that fell on top of her.

Nina dug a hole in the wave of rubble with external Kei and escaped danger through it.

But after getting through that crisis, another crisis appeared on the other side.

Nina hadn't escaped the giants' surround.

The spears shot towards her from behind, being pulled back. Nina parried the debris that was still showering through the air as she avoided them and changed to levitation for movement.

Nina rose up. This was also to confirm the overall situation.

But.....

"What's going on?"

After reaching a certain altitude, the sensation of being caught by something viscous assaulted Nina. The speed at which she ascended with levitation clearly slowed.

Something was covering the sky of the abandoned city.

"You don't want to let me run, huh?"

But she hadn't thought the opponents would have those methods.

"I can't underestimate them. I thought they were just annoyances."

It seemed that she would be unable to escape by brute force. Nina immediately changed her line of thought and descended to the ground.

Since she couldn't run, all she could do was fight her way out.

After Nina decided this, she started to unleash her Kei. Just then --

"This....."

A Kei flow came from someone other than her.

It was a strange feeling as if it were far away but also very close. Though its nature was different from the Keis of the teams outside the city, Nina had recollections of it.

"No way....."

Nina looked around and then noticed it.

It was a rift.

The thundering waves of Kei were spilling from its depths, engulfing the surrounding giants.

It was coming. A phenomenon occurred at the same time as her body felt this.

External Kei variant - Omnidirectional Resounding Sword.

This was a move where the user filled an area with Kei and then condensed it into a blade.

The Kei that engulfed the giants was the sword that this Kei had become.

A huge sword as large as these giants.

The sword pierced through the giants' torsos. They were sent flying in strange postures.

"Your Kei power is as crazy as always."

Nina felt stunned at the crude way they were sent flying as she looked at the ones who jumped out from the rift.

They appeared riding a beast wrapped in green flame.

"Layfon! Felli!"

Nina called out.

After hearing her voice, Layfon and Felli approached.

"Captain, how's the situation right now?"

"I want to ask you that."

"Uh, Layfon. It's about time to stop calling her Captain."

"Ahh, that's true."

The laid-back conversation put a wry smile on Nina's face.

"You're still the same as always."

Their external appearances were the same, and the conversation was too.

"Is that the way you should treat your saviors?"

"No, I didn't mean that."

Perhaps feeling displeased with Nina's way of talking, Felli spoke sarcastically:

"As for us, I just kind of turned into an immortal superpowered beautiful girl, but don't be jealous of me. After all, I've been beautiful since birth, so it's just a slight improvement. Well, it would be troublesome if you treated me as the same type as Eri. After all, that girl's completely different from me."

"Uh, I got it, my mistake."

Nina deeply felt like she shouldn't talk about this kind of topic.

"Then do you know anything about this situation?"

"Uh, we pretty much know the true identity of the Searchers."

"Really!?"

"But we kind of fell into a trap."

Just like always, a dull, troubled smile hung on Layfon's face as he said this.

"What do you mean, trap?"

"Captain, you know, right? The spatial dimensions in this city has been sealed."

Felli's calm voice lowered the temperature around them:

"Even if Layfon and the Captain have become strong enough to make people question reality, you aren't strong enough to break through a world's walls with physical power. Of course, I'm the same."

"By the way Felli, you just called Captain Captain."

"......What's wrong with that?'

"Nothing."

Layfon quickly surrendered as she glared at him.

"Speaking of which, it was also Captain's fault. Why'd she have to be regarded as the captain."

"It's my fault now!?"

And even Nina was affected.

"So, what do you mean when you say the spatial dimensions were sealed?"

Nina desperately tried to change the topic.

"I mean exactly that."

"Uh, so what exactly is....."

"If you're in the same world, you can use the Electronic Fairy En to jump around, but currently there's no one who has constructed a way to jump between different worlds. Even if we used En, we would need an Electronic Fairy or assistance from one. So humans have yet to find any techniques for jumping between space. In other words, when I say I mean exactly that, the Severed Space Exploration Plan needed to condense seven hundred million gigajoules of energy into the space of one cubic centimel, so unless you can realize that kind of outrageous destructive energy, you won't be able to break through space. Incidentally, as for about how much seven hundred million gigajoules of compressed energy is....."

"My bad!"

In the end, it became Nina's mistake again.

"I got it, I was wrong. Then how can we escape this place?"

"We can't."

Felli asserted without hesitation.

"Then what do we do?"

"Wait for rescue."

"What?"

"We can do almost nothing here, so we can only wait for rescue.
"

"But that....."

"Eh, it's not too bad to be the side waiting for rescue once in a while, right?"

"No, but that....."

"Speaking of which, you're getting old too, so it's about time to think about how to develop your juniors."

"I don't want you to talk about my age!"

Nina shouted at the two who hadn't change at all since that day.

"Also, Layfon, why aren't you saying anything?"

"No....."

"What?"

"It's about time to think of how to deal with these giants, right?"

As Layfon said this, a giant stood up behind him. Of course, the same thing happened behind Nina and Felli.

In other words, they were surrounded.

"......If we're waiting for people to come save us, there should be people coming to deal with these guys too, right?"

"How's that possible? Even rescuers wouldn't come that quickly ."

"Honestly....."

Felli spoke unconcernedly, which made Nina scratch at her hair.

"Captain."

"What!"

"What's this abandoned city called?"

"Huh? I think it was called the Sky Spider City Terachda."

"I see."

"So what?'

"No....."

Layfon spoke vaguely as he looked around as if to look for something outside of the battle.

"I feel a very nostalgic feeling, although I can't remember anything about it at all."

"......I see."

Nina didn't really understand what Layfon was saying. But from his face, Nina realized that this was what Eri's divination had been about.

Was there some kind of meaning here?

No.....

"Well, let's drive them out quickly to keep from destroying this city any further."

"After that we can just lay back and wait for rescue. Yatisha will find some way to manage our lives until then."

"Oh, so you're Yatisha!"

Nina looked at the beast Layfon and Felli were riding with wide eyes.

Though she felt sorry for the attacking giants, Nina didn't have any reason to fear them.

"Though it's only the three of us, the Seventeenth Platoon has assembled. What's there to be scared of?"

"That's true."

"Yeah!"

Their two happy faces touched Nina's heart.

No matter how the enemies changed their appearance, all her fear and confusion vanished when her friends were with her.

Nina deeply believed this fact. It made her feel very happy as she ran forth.

Translation Notes and References

1. ↑ A character from the CSR Missing Mail manga.
2. ↑ The strain of bacteria that makes yogurt.
3. ↑ Literally water-gushing tree.
4. ↑ This is actually a thing in Japan, where people die from working 100+ hour weeks.
5. ↑ I'm unsure, but Mifi might be referring to herself.
6. ↑ Clothing made only by commission.
7. ↑ In the sense of being temporary.
8. ↑ One kilomel is approximately one kilometer.
9. ↑ I have no recollection of what this is.